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ABSTRACT

This study examined teacher perceptions during the implementation of a nongraded, multiage primary school program. Issues surrounding teacher beliefs about the definition, challenges, and benefits of nongradedness were examined. Individual case studies and a cross-case analysis were completed through content analysis. Six classroom teachers participated in the study, all women, who varied in teaching and educational experience. The school housed grades K through 5, serving a predominantly low income area of Bellingham, Ohio. Results indicated that teachers exhibited various consistencies and inconsistencies in their application of the "nongraded" definition. Distinct characteristics of their definitions included teaching to older students, teaching topics rather than subjects, using learning centers, meeting students' unique needs and interests, and budgeting time. Perceived challenges included administration-induced problems, such as standardized testing and a vague retention policy; assessment challenges, such as maintaining individual documentation; organizational challenges, especially in trying to create flexible, nonpermanent groups of children; curricular and instructional challenges such as individualizing instruction; the need for more materials; the complexity of nongradedness, especially for struggling students; the increased preparation necessary; and dealing with undesirable student behavior. Perceived benefits included a supportive classroom environment, the opportunity for students to learn various roles, enhanced social and emotional development, time for teachers to know the children, higher expectations, and the variety and choices offered to students. (Contains about 85 references.) (KDFB)

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A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A NONGRADED, MULTIAGE CONTINUOUS PROGRESS PRIMARY PROGRAM

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Mid-Western Educational Research Association
Chicago, Illinois
October 4, 1996

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Introduction

Nongraded, multiage classrooms date back to the dame schools of colonial times when children of varying ages were placed in the same classroom. The one-room schoolhouse of the 1800s, a time when schools were mostly in rural settings, was another example of a nongraded educational setting (Miller, 1991). Later, during the era of the industrial revolution, masses of families with children infiltrated urban areas. Educators saw the need for the graded school as a logical way to manage the large number of children. By 1860, the graded system had been adopted by most communities, especially in the cities (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987).

After World War II, some educators began to question graded schools as the best way to educate children. At this time, concern for the education of the individual was given the attention it rightfully deserved (Anderson & Pavan, 1993) as some prominent educators balked at arranging students in a graded, lock-step arrangement (Grant, 1994). Major events such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the withholding of federal dollars from segregated schools, the Chapter One program, Head Start, and Public Law 94-142 have all made an impact on how educators view students (Anderson & Pavan). Interest in the nongraded philosophy has also been attributed to an outgrowth of the progressive movement in education (Chase & Doan, 1994).

Extensions of these benchmarks in educational history have included educational programs, such as nongradedness, which view the child in a different way. Programs of individualization were implemented in the 1960s as the quest for a more developmentally appropriate and less rigid approach to organizing children for instruction became a common cry of educators. The nongraded, multiage arrangement was also perceived as a more humanistic and desirable way to instruct children (Lewis, 1969; McLoughlin, 1969; Otto, 1969). Open education, which enjoyed a high level of popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is another example of an innovation which was thought to be more humanistic (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Long, 1994; McDonald, 1993).

Presently, the nongraded, multiage approach is experiencing a resurgence in popularity (Gutloff, 1995). Nongraded, multiage programs have been studied and advocated by prominent educators for the last few decades (Anderson & Pavan, 1993; Gaustad, 1992; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Hillson, 1971; Hunter, 1992; Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990; Katz, 1992; Lodish, 1992; Lewis, 1969; McLoughlin, 1969; Otto, 1969). Recently, the states of Kentucky, Mississippi and Oregon have mandated nongraded, multiage programs while several other states have legislation pending (Lodish). In the province of British Columbia, Canada, primary units have replaced the early grades which have traditionally been categorized as grades kindergarten through three (Katz). Such mandates are clearly an attempt at educational restructuring with a focus on the nongraded, multiage approach as a way to improve teaching and learning during early school experiences. Miller (1991) observed, "The large-scale innovations of the 60s and 70s have virtually ended. But the multigrade classroom persists . . ." (p. 1).

As will be indicated in the following section, research has revealed three problems associated with nongradedness. First, there have been problems with defining nongradedness. There is no common definition that has been accepted by all of the educators involved in some form of nongradedness. Secondly, researchers and educators

have experienced challenges with documenting the effectiveness of nongradedness. Thirdly, those who have instituted nongradedness have identified implementation concerns which evolved from establishing nongraded programs.

Researchers have also identified benefits resulting from the implementation of a multiage, nongraded continuous progress program. These will be mentioned briefly and then referred to again as conclusions are presented. In the rest of this paper, the background to the study and the problem statement will be presented first, a description of the methodology will follow. Then, the results and a discussion of the conclusions will be provided.

Background to the Study

The purpose of this study was to document the perceptions of teachers during the implementation of a nongraded, multiage program. Past implementation and research efforts associated with nongraded, multiage programs have demonstrated that the concept of nongradedness is very complex and multidimensional. Issues surrounding nongradedness include the difficulties with defining nongradedness and with the research that attempted to document the effectiveness of nongradedness (McLoughlin, 1969; Otto, 1969). The implementation process has proven to be an issue and a challenge for educators (Miller, 1991). Studies have been published which document the importance of studying teacher perceptions during the change process (Englert, Tarrant, & Rozendal, 1993; Pace, 1992; Scharer, 1992a). The support for this study is organized under two main areas: issues surrounding nongradedness and teacher perceptions.

Issues Surrounding Nongradedness: Definition, Challenges, and Benefits

There are several concerns associated with nongradedness which illuminate the problematic nature surrounding nongradedness. In this section, it will be shown that because of the various definitions that have been applied previously to nongradedness, an operational definition of nongradedness was needed to guide this study. Then, the limitations surrounding studies on nongradedness will be discussed, as will studies which address implementation concerns. Finally, a brief section on studies which have addressed the benefits of nongradedness will follow.

Defining nongradedness. Programs which are nongraded have been called ungraded, multigraded and more recently, multiage. A nongraded, multiage arrangement is broadly defined as a system for grouping children in classes without grade-level labels including children with more than a one-year age span. In a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program, a classroom of mixed-age children are taught using developmentally appropriate activities which enable them to progress at their own rates. These activities are not dictated by grade, but rather by the child's needs and interests. Thus, "The true philosophy of nongradedness is the belief that individuals are unique and need different treatments to reach their maximum growth potential" (Anderson & Pavan, 1993, p. 43).

The identification of an operational definition of nongradedness has proven to be problematic. Lewis's (1969) research revealed that very few educators could agree on a single definition of nongradedness and used organizational structures such as team teaching or homogeneous and ability grouping to define it. In Smith's (1971) description of a nongraded reading program, students of the same ability and of varying ages were grouped together, thereby creating a homogeneous ability grouping of students. Demonstrating that heterogeneity is an important feature of nongradedness, Goodlad and Anderson (1987) emphasized in their 1963 edition of a book on nongradedness that the grouping for multiage classrooms should be based upon heterogeneous abilities of children.

With such problems existing in defining nongradedness, an operational definition was needed to guide this study. A synthesis of the eight edicts that Anderson (1995) proposed and the behavioral indicators which Anderson and Pavan (1993) offered in their explanation of the ideal nongraded school served as the definition that guided this study. Robert Anderson and Barbara Nelson Pavan serve as co-directors of the International Registry of Nongraded Schools (IRONS). One of their overriding concerns has been that educators become aware of what is meant by authentic nongradedness. IRONS was formed as a response to the resurgence of nongradedness and serves as a clearinghouse of information for schools who wish to join the registry and receive publications regarding materials which benefit those implementing nongraded programs. Presently, there are registrants from 21 states and three foreign countries (Anderson, 1995). A significant purpose of IRONS is to ensure that those who are practicing nongradedness do so using an authentic definition. Schools registering for membership in the IRONS project are required to describe their progress in achieving authentic nongradedness (Anderson, 1995). Authentic nongradedness can be identified by analyzing the main areas of Anderson and Pavan's ideal nongraded school: the goals of schooling, the organizational structure of teachers and students, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and use of materials (Anderson & Pavan, 1993).

Within the first area, goals of schooling, Anderson (1995) proposed the following:

> 1. All of the labels and mechanisms commonly used in the Graded School for identifying the status/standing of pupils have been officially changed to labels and terms appropriate to the concept of continuous progress and nongradedness.
>
> 2. Grade-related promotion, retention, and tracking practices have been abandoned and eliminated. (p. 1)

The goals of the nongraded school reflect a desire to educate students to be self-directing and autonomous. Children are encouraged to develop the skills necessary for productive and responsible membership in civic, social, and work groups (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). In the pursuit of these goals, Anderson (1995) maintained that it is imperative for Boards of Education to support such goals and to assist "in providing waivers regarding requirements and practices from the State Department of Education" (p. 1).

The grouping of teachers and students is also a vital component of the operational definition of the authentic nongraded program. Teachers should be organized in teams to provide opportunities to interact and collaborate. Student teams include multiage groups of at least two age cohorts and are deliberately heterogeneous. Non-permanent grouping patterns of students are employed for instructional purposes and are sometimes homogeneous and often heterogeneous (Anderson, 1995; Anderson & Pavan, 1993).

The ideal nongraded curriculum is child centered and integrated. "As much as possible, the curriculum is presented through interdisciplinary themes or units," maintained Anderson (1995, p. 1). Math, reading, writing, science, social studies, art, and music are often approached simultaneously. The curriculum in the nongraded school is

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based upon the child's interests and needs. This includes the child's unique abilities, learning rates, and learning styles (Anderson & Pavan, 1993).

Instruction in the ideal nongraded program includes the consideration of all phases of human growth, multiple learning styles, and challenging experiences that promote confidence and risk-taking behaviors. Teachers serve as facilitators of instruction rather than dispensers of information. "The process is more important than the product," suggested Anderson and Pavan (1993, p. 83).

A variety of materials is needed to cover the wide ranges of abilities and interests in the ideal nongraded program. These include trade books, reference materials, manipulatives for math, microscopes, and many other materials for various content area centers the teacher sets up around the room. Children are allowed to explore in an environment in which "Learning is the result of the student's interaction with the environment" (Anderson & Pavan, 1993, p. 87).

In terms of assessment, "Appropriate, essentially-noncompetitive mechanisms and procedures are in place for assessing pupil progress, for maintaining records of that progress, and for reporting progress to the concerned parties without the usage of ABCDEF and S-U designations" (Anderson, 1995, p. 1). Multiple sources of documentation are utilized and children's work is assessed in terms of their own potential (Anderson & Pavan, 1993).

At the 1994 Society for Developmental Education's National Conference on Multiage Continuous Progress Classrooms, practicing teachers explained how some of these practices that contribute to the authentic nongraded program were implemented during a regular school day. For example, teachers explained how blocks of time were arranged for reading and writing workshops, the use of hands-on math and science, and the integration of curriculum (Clason, Kohn, & Tillotson, 1994; Lehman, 1994; Thompson, 1994). In addition to literacy instruction, other topics included: cooperative learning, developmentally appropriate practices, conflict resolution, learning centers, and self-esteem (LaRoche, 1994).

As Lewis's (1969) and more recently Hoffmann's (1985) research have indicated, various definitions have been applied to nongradedness. Team teaching and ability grouping were definitions that have been linked to nongradedness in the past (Lewis). The intent of Hoffmann's study was to document the participants' definition and understanding of the nongraded school. The results showed that the definitions of parents, teachers, and principals had an effect on the degree to which nongradedness was practiced, thereby showing that perceptions of definition are important.

This study proceeded with the knowledge that the definition is a problematic one and that teachers may vary in their implementation of a nongraded, multiage program. With the realization that an authentic and legitimate definition was needed to guide this research, two of the above sources were used: the aforementioned behavioral indicators (Anderson & Pavan, 1993) and Anderson's (1995) definition of nongradedness. While some researchers have argued that nongraded and multiage are different (Katz, Evangelou, and Hartman, 1990), for purposes of this study, the terms nongraded and multiage will be used interchangeably and synonymously.

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Challenges with the implementation of nongradedness. Recent research has identified factors that promote and impede the implementation of a nongraded program. During the implementation of a nongraded program which required more individualization of instruction, class size became one of the factors which teachers felt made it more difficult to teach (Addington & Hinton, 1993). Time for preparation and insufficient teacher education also became pressing issues for the teachers (Aagaard, Coe, Moore & Kannapel, 1994; Miller, 1991). Additionally, the dissemination of information to the teachers, administrators, parents, and the local community are factors which have represented challenges in the past (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987).

Another issue which has been raised in research on nongradedness has been the challenge of documenting its effectiveness. Using an experimental design, both Otto (1969) and McLoughlin (1969) conducted studies which failed to produce results which favored the nongraded program. Both of these comparative studies used standardized tests to measure the outcome, academic achievement. In their synthesis of research on nongradedness, Anderson and Pavan (1993) reported on studies that compared nongraded and graded schools published after 1968. Like the measures used by Otto and McLoughlin, these studies were primarily concerned with comparisons in achievement as measured by standardized tests. The limitations of using standardized tests to study nongradedness are that they fail to address the complex nature of nongradedness and the various criteria which define nongradedness. For example, as documented by Hoffmann (1985), the degree to which nongradedness was practiced had an impact on its effectiveness. In observing that more research on nongradedness is needed, Gutierrez and Slavin (1992) suggested that to overcome these limitations, a very careful and specific definition of nongradedness as the independent variable is imperative. This specific definition would encompass the various criteria that are embodied in the complex definition.

In the final analyses of their comparative studies, both Otto (1969) and McLoughlin (1969) acknowledged these limitations. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) cautions against using standardized tests on young children, stating that "The potential psychological harm of testing is well-documented" (NAEYC, 1988). Similarly, in their synthesis of research on standardized testing, James and Tanner (1993) called for assessments which are developmentally appropriate and help rather than intimidate and produce anxieties in young children.

Besides the fact that standardized tests may be inappropriate for measuring differences among children, they also fail to provide information for studying the teachers' and programs' interpretations of nongradedness. As they reflected on the insignificant results their studies produced, Otto (1969) and McLoughlin (1969) both acknowledged that their participants' interpretations of the nongraded definition required further examination. McLoughlin stated that while the schools he researched did indeed place children in multiage groupings, the teachers failed to improve on the instructional methods they had employed as traditional classroom teachers. Otto reflected that if a nongraded school is to fulfill its mission, "many related facets of the internal organization . . . must be altered simultaneously" (p. 126). Both Otto (1969) and Miller (1991) contended that in the study of nongradedness, researchers might examine how the components of the nongraded program contributed to or detracted from its effectiveness.

Goodlad and Anderson (1987) have been studying nongradedness since the late 1950s and maintained that the study of nongradedness is "rarely accompanied by a systematic scheme for evaluating the effectiveness" (p. 209). In a systematic scheme, Otto (1969) proposed that variables such as grouping of pupils, appraising pupil progress, reporting to parents, textbook management, library usage, principal's influence, the use of special teachers, and assignment of special education pupils should be studied to determine how they affect the program's outcomes, however they are defined. While stressing that nongradedness is not for the inexperienced or poorly trained teacher, Miller (1991) agreed that it is indeed a challenge to examine to what extent such experiences are part of preservice and inservice training. Miller elaborated further by stating that in the research of nongraded programs, the essential areas for investigation should be: organization of the classroom, discipline and classroom management, self-directed learning, peer tutoring, organization of curriculum and instruction, delivery of instruction, and grouping practices.

Benefits. One of the benefits incurred from nongradedness can be attributed to the additional time teachers spend with children (Gutloff, 1995). One-third to one-half of their classroom returns each year. "Loss of investment" is a term used to describe how teachers can feel in a graded setting when they are unable to continue with the development of rapport and progress with a child because it is time for them to enter the next grade (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987, p. 68). In contrast, teachers in a nongraded setting have the luxury of time as they maintain at least a two year relationship with each student. In addition, they do not have to spend as much time on establishing classroom routine as they did in a graded arrangement, and while teaching for continuous progress, learning begins right where it left off after each calendar break (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Hunter, 1992).

Other studies of nongradedness have indicated that one of the main benefits is improved learner satisfaction and social and emotional affect (Miller, 1990; Pratt, 1983; Way, 1981). Students in a nongraded atmosphere generally have more peer interaction. They do not suffer from the fear of retention, a fear which can detract from their emotional well-being.

The teacher's role of teaching for continuous progress, an important part of the nongraded definition, benefits students as they are treated on an individual basis. Students do not feel pressured into finishing a set number of books before they enter second grade as the students are able to proceed at their own rate and have additional time to master the first grade curriculum. Conversely, there are no grade-level barriers in a nongraded classroom that might prevent students from engaging in learning experiences that extend beyond the first grade curriculum. Teachers maintained that the second grade curriculum is less demanding than the first grade curriculum so the expansion of time for students to complete first grade objectives does not interfere with the mastery of second grade objectives (Hume & Moore, 1995).

One reason advocates feel nongradedness benefits students is the individualized approach that facilitates teaching for continuous progress. Studies have been conducted which indicate an increase in student achievement among at-risk populations (Pavan, 1992), among gifted students (Hafenstein, Jordan, & Tucker, 1993) and in reading achievement (Ricciotti & Soares, 1983).

Teacher Perceptions

The perceptions of teachers during the implementation process are important for two reasons: (a) they are responsible for putting the innovation into practice and, (b) teachers' perceptions often serve as the binding force and impetus that reinforce lasting change and innovation (Englert et al., 1993; Pace, 1992). Researchers and theorists have agreed that failing to require teachers to engage in thoughtful discussions during their participation in various educational programs has detracted from forming deeper understandings about the program (Englert et al., 1993; Haberman & Dill, 1993).

For example, as Scharer (1992a) studied teachers' perceptions during an innovation in literacy instruction, she encouraged teachers to discuss their perceptions as they participated. Resultant data indicated that teachers perceived many aspects of their roles differently in the areas of planning, use of materials, and evaluation methods. Additionally, the study found that teachers varied in their use of instructional methods and in their ability to change from previous practices.

Similarly, Pace (1992) identified tensions, or challenges, which evolved when teachers moved from a traditional approach to literacy to the implementation of whole-language literacy instruction. One of the challenges was attributed to the fact that teachers were following a new curriculum. It was concluded that these sources of tension served to provide a deeper understanding of both the change process and implications for staff development. Research on teachers' perceptions during an innovation has documented that staff development must begin with practical ideas that are promptly available in the classroom setting (Scharer, 1992a).

In Duffy's (1993) study of teacher perceptions, it was found that teachers were inhibited by prescriptions and were much more successful when they relied upon their own judgment. Richardson (1990) termed this judgment "warranted practice" (p. 10) as a practice which dictates the empowerment perspective. Warranted practice recognizes that "bottom-up, grass-roots change efforts . . . [which support] . . . teachers as decision makers and change agents will play a major role in any successful, substantive, lasting change in schools" (Pace, 1992, p. 403). Teachers must be given opportunities to question their own practices throughout the innovation. By engaging in thoughtful deliberations during the implementation process, teacher perceptions which identify concerns about their practices and the innovation will be useful to other educators.

Statement of the Problem

The background for this study demonstrated that there are several issues surrounding nongradedness. In light of nongraded programs becoming more prevalent, there is limited research available informing the following question: What happens when a group of teachers implement a nongraded, multiage primary program?

In the previous section which addressed the issues surrounding nongradedness, relevant research which identified challenges and benefits were discussed. The definition of nongradedness, which has been problematic, was discussed and a definition which will guide this study was offered. This definition of the authentic nongraded program was categorized into six areas. Challenges included trying to document increases in student achievement and implementation concerns. Benefits included improved learner satisfaction among students in nongraded programs, time

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for teachers to teach for continuous progress, and gains in student achievement. The problem was framed within three main questions.

The research questions were:

1. As the teachers attempt to apply their knowledge of the definition of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program, do they vary in their implementation?
2. What are the perceived challenges which emerge when a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program is implemented?
3. What are the perceived benefits which emerge when a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program is implemented?

Methodology

The methodology chosen for this research was a qualitative design employing individual case studies and a cross-case analysis. Teacher perceptions of their definition of nongradedness and perceptions of the benefits and challenges incurred during the implementation of a nongraded program were obtained through the resultant data of interviews. The observations conducted throughout the year provided topics for interviews, insights into how the teachers varied in their interpretation of the legitimate nongraded definition, and opportunities for triangulation.

In this section on methodology, a description of the participants and the researcher's history with the site will be presented first before the data collection and data analysis are explained.

The Participants

In the spring of 1994, the superintendent and the Board of Education met to discuss the potential for implementing a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program at Central Elementary. At this meeting the principal, three of the participants, and the researcher presented to the board a folder with related journal articles, and then each spoke on the merits of nongradedness. The board then unanimously voted to approve a pilot program at Central Elementary. The nature of the pilot program was to take traditional first and second graders and place them in a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program. It was decided that "Primary Unit" would be the new term given to identify the traditional first and second graders at Central Elementary.

The six classroom teachers that volunteered to participate in this study were given pseudonyms. All six were asked to participate in the study and all six volunteered without hesitation. By gaining the perspectives of all multiage teachers at this site, the researcher attempted to gain a broader view of what happens when a multiage program is implemented.

All six teachers are women. They varied in years of teaching experience and levels of graduate school education. For example, while Nicole was a second year teacher, Dana had been teaching for 18 years at the time of the study. Both Renita and Roberta had earned Master's degrees while Dana planned to finish her degree the following summer. Ruth went to college to earn her teaching degree after working in a factory and serving as a teacher's aide.

Anne was an experienced teacher who had previously worked in another state and then substitute taught for Bellingham schools before being hired full-time. Table 3.1 shows the varying characteristics of the six participants.

Participant	Undergraduate Training	Years of Teaching Experience	Graduate-Level Training
Nicole	Education Major, Psychology Minor	1	None
Dana	Dual major: special education and elementary education	19	Master's in the summer of 1995
Roberta	Elementary Education	15	Master's in whole language and children's literature in 1992
Anne	Elementary Education	12	Master's in education from 1986 from out of state; still taking courses to earn permanent Ohio teaching certificate
Renita	Elementary Education	6	Master's in whole language and children's literature in 1992
Ruth	Elementary Education	9	30 post-baccalaureate hours from three different institutions

Table 3.1 Description of the six participants

Researcher's History with Site and Participants

The researcher had been an eleven-year employee of the school district for the site chosen for this study. Central Elementary, in the city of Bellingham, were the pseudonyms used to refer to the site. For the year prior to and during the implementation of the nongraded program, the researcher was employed as a morning kindergarten teacher at Central.

Central Elementary was a K-5 school situated in the predominantly low income sector of Bellingham, Ohio, a city of approximately 14,000 people. The district followed an open enrollment policy for transfers from other city schools and neighboring districts. Five children applied for and were granted permission to enroll for the 1994-1995 school year.

Roughly 69% of Central students qualified for free or reduced lunch rates, compared with percentages of 14%, 23%, and 27% at the other elementary schools in the city. Of the four elementary schools in Bellingham, Central ranks lowest in standardized test scores and highest in number of students identified for special education services. While 79% of metropolitan housing units in Bellingham County are located in Bellingham, 63% of them are in Central's

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designated elementary school district. Seventy-one percent of the families which receive Aid to Dependent Children in the city of Bellingham are located in Central's district (Pendergast, 1994).

The researcher became interested in the nongraded program when the topic first arose at Central because it was possible that a kindergarten, first, and second grade class might have been formed. Even though the kindergarten classes were eventually excluded from the multiage arrangement, the researcher's curiosity continued. In fact, the researcher and five of the six nongraded teachers wrote a grant proposal for this program which fulfilled a requirement for part of the researcher's graduate studies.

As this proposal was written and preparations were made to present this nongraded program to the Board of Education, the researcher became an ally to the teachers and principals, someone who could provide sources and help prepare proposals. Of particular interest to the researcher was how nongradedness assimilated current research on curriculum, instruction, grouping patterns for students and teachers, motivation, and assessment into one educational program. Because the researcher played an important, supportive part in the development of the proposals, this program presented itself as a significant opportunity for conducting research. The researcher's familiarity with the school district and the participants also made it easier for the researcher to gain access to the research site.

At the spring Bellingham Board of Education meeting in which approval was granted to begin this program as a pilot project, the researcher was in attendance and joined the principal and teachers in speaking on the merits of nongradedness. When the Bellingham Board of Education provided funding for the principal and four of this study's participants to attend the 1994 Society for Developmental Education's National Conference on Multiage Continuous Progress Classrooms in Cincinnati, Ohio, the researcher was also allowed to attend.

Access to the site for this study was facilitated by the prior relationship the researcher enjoyed as a longstanding employee of the district and as a current employee of Central during the 1994 - 1995 school year. By working closely with the teachers as a colleague and then as an ally, the researcher knew that the participants would be involved in the inception of an educational program that would provide data concerning the research questions that guided this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were gathered from interviews, observations, and document review. This process was organized in four phases. The majority of data was collected during the 1994-1995 school year, the initial year of the implementation of the nongraded primary program. The study concluded with final meetings with each participant in the spring of 1996. Phase I commenced in October of 1994. Phase II began in January, and Phase III began after the Easter break in April of 1995. Phase IV represented the culmination of this study as the teacher met with each participant during April and May of 1996, after the researcher had completed the data analysis.

Six individual case studies and a cross-case analysis of the six teachers were completed through content analysis. The use of a file card system, where coded data are transferred onto index cards, was used for the physical handling of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). As the interviews and observations were completed, transcripts and observations were reviewed and compared to generate codes and themes. This review began with the review of each

individual case whereby codes and themes emerged as they related to the three main research questions. Then, the resultant data served as the basis for a cross-analysis as the individual cases were compared with each other for similarities and differences (Patton, 1990).

Some of the categories were identified a priori while the other categories emerged during the data analysis. The coding of data pertained to the research questions relating to the participants' definition of nongradedness and their perceived benefits and challenges of this nongraded, multiage continuous progress program. The codes and sensitizing concepts were clarified by the review of literature and by teachers' comments in interviews. As the definition of the ideal, legitimate nongraded classroom was presented in chapters one and two, this definition served as a sensitizing concept. The teachers' responses during interviews and observations also served a similar purpose. As interviews served to provide a contextual background for the classroom observations, observations also provided substance for the ensuing interviews. As each phase evolved, the researcher compiled reflections which helped to direct the study for the following phase.

The preliminary coding of data was completed in reference to the three research questions and are labeled A, B, and C in the tables. Data relating to the criteria embodied in the nongraded definition and the participants' perceived challenges and benefits served as the substance of these three initial, general themes. This process is explained further in Table 3.2.

	Category	Description	Example
A	Participant's Definition	Data characteristic of how the participant defined nongradedness within the six criteria: goals of schooling, organization of teachers and students, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and use of materials	"I go around and check things over, but I just make suggestions and tell them [the students] how they need to do this better or encourage them to do more."
B	Perceived Challenges	Data pertaining to any difficulties or problems the participant had encountered because of the implementation of nongradedness	"We're still under some constraints from the administration."
C	Perceived Benefits	Data representing a strength, benefit, or positive outcome that had resulted from the program	"I think having the same teacher for two years in a row can be anxiety reducing."

Table 3.2. Preliminary coding categories.

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From these themes, the researcher organized the data into more specific categories. For example, remarks that reflected the participants' unique definition of nongradedness, or category A in table 3.2, were organized into the six main areas of the ideal nongraded definition:

1. What are the participant's views on the goals of schooling?
2. What are the participant's views on the organizational structuring of teacher teams and grouping of students?
3. What are the participant's views on curriculum?
4. What are the participant's views on instruction?
5. What are the participant's views on assessment and reporting practices?
6. What are the participant's views on the use of materials?

Whereas the notion of the ideal nongraded definition, category A, was an a priori consideration as this research began, the other themes emerged as the implementation process continued. For example, after data were coded as challenges, category B, the researcher reviewed these challenges to identify codes and themes. This process is explained further in Table 3.3.

Category B: Challenges	Description	Example
Organizational	Any data referring to challenges resulting from grouping patterns of students or teachers.	"It was hard to keep all groups balanced and moving along."
Curricular and Instructional	Any data referring to challenges stemming from the nongraded curriculum or instructional practices.	"We wanted to have only five or six broad, thematic objectives."
Assessments	Any data referring to challenges that evolved from the assessments used in this program.	"What criteria have to be met before being certain as to what actually constitutes mastery?"
Materials	Data in which problems with materials were discussed.	"I didn't have any level three books."
Administrative	Data in which the participants felt the administration had caused problems.	"It [standardized testing] was a bad experience to have to put them through."
Challenges resulting from the complexity of nongradedness	Data which implied that because nongradedness is complex, its various parts that define it must be given careful attention.	"If we didn't do any hands-on science, I don't think it would be as motivating."
Increased preparation	Data in which the participants felt that, as a result of participating in this program, they had experienced an increase in time spent on preparation.	"It's just new, so there's more preparation and planning."
Undesirable student behavior	Data in which the participants perceived that inappropriate behavior occurred as a result of nongradedness.	"Sometimes [they] want to keep it [information] to themselves. They just want to get on with it and not be hindered by others bothering them."

Table 3.3: Coding categories for perceived challenges.

A similar process evolved as the researcher reviewed and classified data according to the participants' perceived benefits of nongradedness, category C. Data that were initially classified as benefits were then reviewed to identify emerging codes and themes. Table 3.4 shows how the benefits were further analyzed and coded.

Category 'C' Benefits	Description	Example
Supportive Environment	Data which indicate that students are being supported by sources other than the teacher.	"They can do these projects a lot easier. We're making ornaments and ... they're helping each other."
Learning Various Roles	Data pertaining to students' assimilation of specific roles, including students' abilities to serve as role models for others.	"They take it upon themselves to change them. I mean they see themselves as leaders."
Development of Students Social and Emotional Aspects	Data which indicate an acquisition of improved social or emotional aspects, i.e. positive feelings about self, respect, or being accepting and tolerant of others.	"They're used to sharing things and they're not afraid of sharing things with each other."
Variety and Choice	Data relating to how the children have experience variety, choice, or have learned to become more involved in decision making and problem solving as a result of being in this program.	"There is probably a total of like 30 books, at least, and they need to choose ten of those."
Time	Data describing benefits derived from being given more time with students.	"I think staying with the same teacher is a big advantage because that teacher knows those children so well."
Knowledge of Students	Data describing how the teacher and/or student has a greater knowledge of the students' potential.	"Teachers know where students have been and where they're going."
High Expectations	Data describing how teachers have raised their expectations of students' capabilities beyond what might be expected in a traditional classroom.	"Multiage is good in that you present to the older ones and the younger ones are all listening and sometimes ... they know things. ... She is getting things she would never have gotten in first grade."

Table 3.4 Coding of categories for perceived benefits

The researcher used a peer debriefer and member checking to enhance the quality and credibility of this study. As part of the data collection process, the participants were offered the opportunity to address other rival or competing explanations throughout the study as they engaged in member checking. Member checks are thought to be the most critical procedure for ensuring credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In the setting of this research, each of the six participants completed at least five member checks, including a final member check at the conclusion of this study. During the final member check, the participants reviewed their own case study. Member checks also included the sharing of transcripts, clarifying of interview questions, and furnishing the participants with the research questions, findings, and interpretations. After each observation, the researcher reread and typed the field notes, attempting to objectively describe what had occurred during the time in the teacher's classroom. The teachers were provided with a copy of each observation and were encouraged to comment and/or correct any of the researcher's observations.

Prolonged engagement and persistent and frequent observations are other factors believed to influenced the credibility of a study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The length of the time in which data were collected, over nine months for the majority of the data and then into the second year of the study, also increased the credibility of this study.

Results

The results of this study will be explained in the form of a cross-case analysis of each question.

Cross-Case Analysis of Research Question #1

The cross-case analysis is a distilled examination of the six stories. It is presented to compare and contrast the responses of the participants. This analysis incorporated information reported in the individual stories and information that was part of the data collected by the writer but not reported in each individual story.

The first research question asked, As the teachers attempt to apply their knowledge of the definition of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program, do they vary in their implementation? Since it was divided among six categories, how the teachers varied will be presented in the form of the six questions.

How Do Teachers Vary According to Their Goals of Schooling? The main goal of the nongraded, multiage program was to teach for the continuous progress of the individual students, as implied by the title of this program. The participants in this study identified goals that they perceived as being desirable outcomes and the procedures for attaining certain outcomes.

Each of the six teachers commented on how the goals of schools should be to provide realistic, real life experiences for the children. For example, Renita gave the example of how when they learned to count money, she would teach this in the context of going to the store and ensuring that proper transactions occurred. Anne felt that the multiage classroom was much like society in that students formed alliances based on interests, not on age or grade level.

The six teachers described the ideal classroom environment. They all felt that such an environment should stimulate curiosity and exploration. Nicole posited that children should enjoy school while Dana called for a "stress free" environment. They felt children should feel uninhibited to take risks and that the atmosphere should be noncompetitive and nonthreatening. Such an environment, Dana claimed, would enable students to reach their full potential for learning.

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Another important goal that each of the six teachers felt strongly about was that students should become more responsible for their own learning. Anne claimed that students should become "self-starters" while Ruth suggested that students must learn to "develop their own learning styles." During this process, it was imperative that students practiced decision making skills as the "ultimate goal," according to Dana, is for students to "want to learn on their own."

An appreciation of diversity and differences in others should be valued and celebrated, the six teachers believed, and this was much easier to facilitate in a classroom where students of varying interests, ages, and abilities merged. Dana maintained that children should be "allowed to be who they are." As her classroom had a few boys who exhibited special needs, Roberta felt her children had learned to become very "accepting of others." Nicole argued that appreciating the diversity among countries and cultures should be stressed in schools.

Two ideas were presented by only some of the teachers. First, both Roberta and Ruth raised the idea that one of the goals of schools should be to encourage teachers to continuously learn from the students. As Ruth reflected on her experiences as a factory worker, she stressed that "quality" was more important than "quantity" and that in the context of the classroom, quality assurance would only be enhanced if teachers continually looked at the product, the child, for guidance. Roberta also felt that when teachers stop learning from students, they will no longer be effective educators.

Roberta was the only participant to discuss how a goal of schools should be to extend the "boundaries" from which students can benefit. She discussed the assumption that if "children are natural learners," then the school should extend the ceilings and floors that traditionally bind their learning. These "broader boundaries," Roberta felt, would include all available resources in attempting to achieve what was best each situation. She gave the example of a boy with special needs who was projected to spend his third grade with three different teachers. "We've got to start thinking beyond the four walls of the classroom," Roberta claimed.

How Do Teachers Vary According to the Organization of Teachers and Students? Each of the six teachers varied in their approaches to the grouping of students for instruction. All of the teachers stressed the need to group students heterogeneously during the day which they did in the various content areas and during center time activities. However, for reading instruction and sometimes math instruction, four of the teachers held meetings with ability groups on a regular basis. The other two, Dana and Renita, attempted to alternate their reading groups periodically. For example, Dana explained that on Wednesdays, she would meet with students randomly and address their individual reading needs. Renita grouped her students for skills, such as report writing, and then the group composition would change according to another need, such as story writing. Only one of the teams, the team of Dana, Roberta, and Anne, departmentalized their instruction for the students across their team. They had grouped the students according to their mastery of math objectives and felt it had been a very successful endeavor.

Each of the teachers agreed that team teaching was important for teaching in a multiage program as it helped them to not only share ideas, but also pool resources. Five of the six teachers had successfully planned and implemented a career unit. Each teacher collected materials for a center that related to a career, such as electronics or business, and used the center for one week in their classroom. Anne summarized the importance of team teaching as she pointed out

their efforts to plan jointly on a weekly basis, share teaching strategies, and to share materials for language arts and science experiments.

Since the grouping of students constituted a challenge for some of the teachers, this topic will be addressed more in the cross-case analysis of question two.

How Do Teachers Vary According to Their Perceptions About the Curriculum? The teachers had organized the content for the multiage curriculum by combining the district's first and second grades' courses of study. They had developed a checklist to synthesize the multiage curriculum for math, reading, and language arts and had taught the second grade science and social studies curriculum the first year of the program and the first grade science and social studies curriculum the second year. As much as possible, the teachers tried to integrate curriculum objectives according to themes. For example, as the students learned about electricity, they also learned about careers, one of the objectives in the social studies curriculum.

Each of the six teachers felt that the nongraded curriculum should be individualized, child centered, and integrated across the curriculum using thematic units. Anne explained that the continuous progress of the individual student was her main concern in considering curriculum. In arguing that children's interests should influence curricular decisions, Ruth maintained, "You don't know what a child will do when there's a high interest." Dana felt that in some instances, thematic teaching could be irrelevant and contrived. She stressed the importance enabling the students to make meaningful connections across the curriculum.

Because of the various ability and interest levels present in a multiage classroom, all of the teachers stressed that teachers "teach to the top." That is, when material is presented to the whole group, the lesson is targeted for the older children in the room. Ruth had struggled with this approach and discovered in February of the first year of the program that she needed to focus more on the objectives included in the second grade curriculum. All of the teachers agreed that with this approach, even if first year students didn't quite "get it" the first time, they had another year to master the objectives.

Roberta maintained that in a multiage classroom, you "teach topics, not subjects." Once a topic was introduced, developmentally appropriate activities would follow. She gave the example of how instead of teaching math or science, the lessons would focus on addition or plants. Renita stated that teaching thematically kept students' interest levels high as they could relate to the theme on a personal level. She also felt that while the present theme was a constant for all children, it was also a basis from which she could individualize her instruction.

While all of the teachers had dabbled with the use of menus (see Appendix) to organize student curriculum, Nicole was probably the main advocate of their use. They all agreed that the menu served to help them individualize instruction as they could create them for different levels. The menus also would include activities relating to the current theme. Anne's use of a menu system was not as extensive as Nicole's as she explained that her menu consisted of a list of the activities the students knew they were responsible for completing.

The teachers felt that by offering choice and variety as part of the multiage curriculum, they were addressing students' unique needs and interests. Each of the teachers agreed that while providing choices, they increased student

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motivation and improved the students' ability to make decisions. During the day, students could choose which activities to complete first, whom they might work with, and participate in "free choice" activities at one of the centers. Renita stressed that students could always choose from two or three activities to complete at each of her learning centers. Both Anne and Ruth gave examples of students noticing other classmates pursuing activities they might want to try, such as multiplication or a particular story. Such requests would always be honored. While agreeing that choice was important, Dana felt that students can be given too much choice.

Each of the six participants felt that nonacademic aspects of the curriculum were important considerations in a nongraded, multiage program. In this particular area of curriculum, the teachers felt teaching students "how to act" was vital to the smooth operation of classroom management. During observations and conversations during interviews, each of the participants explained how they purposefully taught their students how to work cooperatively, budget their time, follow directions, and solve problems. The best examples witnessed by the researcher included how in Renita's classroom the students made smooth transitions moving from center to center and in Ruth's classroom a student had vomited without causing a disruption.

Nicole discussed how problem solving was an important skill in the nonacademic curriculum. For example, she would present a problem to the class, such as how to act for a substitute teacher, and together they would discuss solutions. Each of the six participants believed strongly that in teaching children how to behave in their multiage classroom, learning the "Ask-three-before-you-ask-me" rule was an important objective in this nonacademic curriculum.

The teachers varied in how they approached the language arts component of the curriculum. Renita and Nicole felt strongly about the use of three different spelling lists and the rote teaching and testing of spelling. Both felt spelling should be approached on more of an individualized basis and as part of their writing. During the first year of the program, neither one administered spelling tests on a regular basis although Nicole had decided to test for spelling achievement during the second year of the program. She felt this gave them needed practice in taking tests. The teachers also varied in their approach to literacy. This will be addressed in the next section on instruction.

How Do Teachers Vary in Their Delivery of Instruction? In their approaches to instruction, all six participants used the term "facilitator" to describe the role they play as teacher in the multiage classroom. Each of them believed that as a facilitator, they encouraged children to become more responsible for their own learning and to learn from other children and using various resources. As facilitators, they felt they encouraged discovery learning, inquiry, inductive thinking, and process learning. With the use of open ended prompts, they felt using this type of instruction enabled the children of varying abilities and interests to respond in a developmentally appropriate way. They also maintained that through this type of instruction, students were more likely to learn to take risks and focus on the why and how of various concepts.

Learning centers were used extensively throughout the six classrooms. These centers included many activities with manipulatives and were very "hands on." While such small group instruction dominated part of the day, the instruction also included whole group instruction and individual instruction with children.

In a previous section that related to organization, the researcher noted that the teachers varied widely in their use of individualized instruction. Roberta, Dana, and Renita were able to individualize their approach to the language arts' curriculum as they consistently met with children more to discuss the individual titles they read. Dana was the only teacher that reported meeting with individuals on a weekly basis. While the rest of the teachers may have met with students individually when they used leveled books for assessment, they did not explain doing so on a regular basis. This problem will be discussed further in the cross-case analysis of the second research question.

How Do Teachers Vary in Their Assessments? Each of the six teachers used the same checklists and report card that they had developed the summer before commencing with nongradedness. The checklists were used to guide the continuous progress of students in the areas of math and language arts. In addition to the checklists, the one assessment they relied on most heavily was the use of running records (Clay, 1993). None of the teachers felt that standardized tests were valid measures of their students' achievement. Renita posited that the assessment process was "critical to multiage" and Anne contended that children in a multiage program receive "substantial documentation" which clearly indicate their strengths and weaknesses.

Four of the six teachers discussed the use of portfolio assessment. Nicole and Renita used portfolios most extensively of the six and Nicole explained how she had incorporated a portfolio day into her monthly schedule. Renita had shared with the board of education how she utilized two different portfolios: one that she sent on to other teachers and one that students took home at the end of the year. Both Anne and Roberta kept samples of students' work which they felt was a meager attempt on their own part of participating in portfolio assessment. Nicole admitted that during the second year of the program, neither the new administration nor the third grade teachers seemed to value the work she had completed on portfolios. This caused her to be less industrious in maintaining them with the same effort and zeal she had exhibited the first year.

The teachers varied in how they involved the students in the assessment process. Nicole had often reviewed children's progress on the checklists and discussed their report cards with them. Renita, who kept a very visible and organized assessment notebook, claimed her students knew where the notebook was at all times and were aware of its contents. She conferred with students on a weekly basis to discuss their progress. Dana explained that her intermittent conversations with students were very important to her assessment process. Ruth stated that while they were rather informal, she tried to meet and confer with individual students on a daily basis. Both Anne and Renita felt that conducting weekly conferences was very difficult to accomplish.

Where the teachers varied most widely in their approach to assessment was in the regularity in which they conducted running records (Clay, 1993). Roberta maintained that in some instances, she would complete one on a daily basis, depending on the needs and ability of the child. While Dana, Anne, and Renita were comfortable and diligent about completing running records (Clay), Nicole and Ruth admitted that, during the first year of the program, they had often waited until the nine weeks report period to complete them on all of the students. However, during the second year of the program, Ruth and Nicole acknowledged that they had become much more comfortable with completing running records (Clay) and completed them much more regularly.

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How Do Teachers Vary in Their Use of Materials? Many similarities existed in the type and amount of materials the teachers had available in their nongraded, multiage classrooms. Each of the teachers had stocked their shelves with various manipulatives and games. They all felt the need to supply students with stimuli relating to the theory of Gardner's multiple intelligences (1990) and with materials that encouraged self-direction. They attempted to provide students with experiences that fulfilled their aesthetic, physical, and social need. Such activities included art centers, building blocks, and materials that included role playing. They all had ample supplies of various genres of books and each class had encyclopedias. Each stressed the need to use texts as resources. Due to the efforts of the two Reading Recovery teachers in the building, each teacher had a supply of leveled Reading Recovery titles. Each room also had at least one computer. Renita and Nicole had two computers in their rooms.

The teachers varied in their use of the basal reader and workbooks. The basal reader constituted a large part of the reading curriculum in the classes of Ruth, Anne, and Nicole. Ruth claimed she relied heavily on the basal and workbook for her first year students. Nicole, Anne, and Dana each stated that they would occasionally borrow from old math and reading workbooks. Dana defended her choice claiming her students liked the workbooks. She also felt using workbooks gave them needed practice in following directions.

While they all agreed that variety was most important in arranging materials in the multiage classroom, Roberta pointed out that most importantly, materials must match the developmental level of the multiage students. Ruth and Roberta felt that they should be materials that encouraged "self-direction" on the part of the students while Nicole thought they should be materials that could provide immediate feedback to students.

Cross-Case Analysis of Research Question #2

The second research question asked, What are the perceived challenges which emerge when a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program is implemented? In all, the researcher identified the emergence of eight different types of challenges that resulted during the implementation of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program. They will be presented according to the following categories: administrative challenges; challenges with assessment; organizational challenges; curricular and instructional challenges; the need for more materials; challenges resulting from the complexity of nongradedness; increased preparation; and undesirable student behavior.

Administrative Challenges. Numerous problems with the administration were perceived by the six participants, especially in the second year of the program when a new principal and new superintendent were hired. During the first year of the program, the main challenge caused by the administration was due to their district's standardized testing policy. The teachers resented having to separate their second graders from their first graders, nor did they think it was a valid measure of their students' abilities. Renita complained:

> We work so hard to develop the idea of family and all year we haven't even talked about grade levels and now we are down to testing. And I'm having to say that the second year students that are going to third grade have to be split off from these kids to take the test.

Dana protested:

> It [the standardized testing] is a bad experience to have to put them through . . . [I wonder] how they are going to feel about themselves when they are done. I have spent all year taking them on from where they were, encouraging them, and now I am going to say, 'What, you can't do this?'

When some of the teachers expressed their frustrations to the superintendent and board of education at a meeting in the spring of 1995, the administration claimed they were thinking of no longer testing second graders. However, during the 1995-1996 school year, the administration changed as a new principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent were named. In the second year of the program, the nongraded teachers were still required to administer standardized tests to any of the former first graders that they had transferred or passed to second grade for that year.

Roberta cited problems with the district's vague retention policy as even though their students were with them for two years, the administration wanted to know who they were passing, retaining, or transferring. When she wanted to retain more students, and therefore prevent them from taking a standardized test the second year, the administration told her she could not retain that many students. She felt that because the policy on retention was so vague, she was powerless to back up her claim that some of her first year students needed to be classified as first year students for more than one year.

During the second year of the program, the teachers felt very defensive about their program and began to wonder about its longevity. Anne felt that the new principal's positivistic approach toward the assessment of primary children caused the principal to think poorly of nongradedness. For example, the new principal had decided that they should abandon the report card they had devised and use the same report card the other first and second grade teachers were using. This would provide a basis for comparison which, in Anne's words, would be comparing "apples to oranges."

Ruth felt that it was "horrible" that the administration had approved their program as a pilot without funding it adequately. She observed that an additional primary teacher was hired without providing her with the necessary resources. She felt this place the teachers in a difficult position. She thought that the teachers were expected to "prove [their] point on a shoestring."

During the second year of the program, the new administration had decided to create two straight, graded classrooms to replace two primary multiage classrooms. Thus, Ruth was scheduled to teach a first grade and Anne would teach second grade. Ruth characterized her projected class as "offering a choice" to parents as she described how she would teach this first grade class in a "more traditional" manner. She explained that it would involve less small group, independent work and more "whole group, teacher directed" learning. Ruth noted that the new principal had allowed a kindergarten teacher to create the class roster based on the kindergarten teacher's opinion of which students could work best in a multiage classroom or in a classroom that was much more teacher directed.

Challenges with Assessment. Each of the teachers admitted it was a struggle to maintain individual documentation on students. This struggle included the effort to maintain student portfolios. The teachers felt it was a challenge to be able to meet and confer with individual students as they all expressed a desire to involve the students more in the evaluation process and in establishing their own learning goals. Both Nicole and Ruth admitted that they did not become comfortable or proficient with completing running records (Clay, 1993) until the second year of the program.

Ruth maintained that their present report card did not provide enough information for the parents. She felt a report card should identify for parents specific ways for helping their children. Anne and Dana felt that their present report card did not evaluate the whole child as certain areas, such as aesthetic and physical development, were not part of the evaluation.

Nicole raised two additional issues relating to assessment and evaluation. First, she felt that all six of the teachers needed to make more of an effort to be consistent in their evaluation as she was unsure as to the level of achievement that constituted mastery in the evaluation process. Secondly, she had extended a great deal of effort into maintaining portfolios with her students. However, during the second year of the program, she found that her efforts may have been wasted as no one seemed to use the information and the administration did not monitor or seem to value this type of assessment.

Organizational Challenges. In organizing students for instruction, four of the six teachers admitted to experiencing difficulty with trying to create flexible, nonpermanent groups of children. Ruth expressed that she was still locked into the three groups of high, medium and low ability students. Nicole, Roberta, and Anne each expressed a desire to have more flexible groups. Roberta felt that she had become so dependent on small group instruction that it caused her to individualize less than she would have liked.

Two of the teachers found it challenging to instruct their classrooms using small group instruction. Nicole posited that because of "personality conflicts" or because the students were unsure of their tasks, it was sometimes difficult for her to keep all groups working productively. Ruth also felt that it was a challenge to "teach the subject so that both groups got the best out of it." She expressed a desire to learn how to keep children working more independently and productively.

Because the six teachers were split into two smaller teams of three, Renita felt it was a real drawback that the six did not collaborate more. As Anne pointed out, in trying to effectively team teach, "Scheduling is a big problem."

Curricular and Instructional Challenges. Because curriculum and instruction are often interrelated, these challenges are grouped together as they demonstrate some difficulties teachers experienced in teaching to the multiage curriculum.

One of the most pressing challenges that was identified by the teachers related to individualizing the curriculum and instruction for the multiage children. Each of the six teachers felt it was difficult to involve these primary children in being responsible for their own work. Anne felt she would like to involve the students more in setting their own goals. Dana was in agreement with this idea and thought it was a challenge for students to complete self-initiated projects.

Ruth was concerned with whether or not all the individual students in her class were doing their best work. Renita had wished she could individualize her spelling instruction and noted that the main challenge lay in that there are so many different areas of curriculum that need to be individualized.

Three of the teachers were concerned about the third grade curriculum. Dana felt that they would be instructed by teachers who did not adhere to the "continuous progress philosophy." Ruth noted that in the third grade, there are more pencil and paper activities and less "freedom of movement." Nicole was dismayed to find that two of her very bright students who had moved onto third grade were not being challenged. She cited how they had completed the same research on the planets that they had done for her and, basically, they were the same reports.

Anne, Roberta, and Ruth felt it was a challenge to ensure that they were addressing all phases of curriculum, especially the one for the second grade course of study. Roberta noted that, after teaching first grade for 14 years, she knew it well, and she would be anxious until she experienced that same familiarity with the second grade part of the curriculum.

Teaching the reading or math for the multiage curriculum posed challenges for three of the teachers. Both Anne and Nicole felt that while they were comfortable in diagnosing the reading errors their young readers made, they would like to know more about how to correct certain reading problems, such as problems with decoding. Dana worried that her students received enough math instruction throughout the day. However, once she and her team had decided to departmentalize the teaching of math, she felt their needs were being met.

In attempting to teach the curriculum thematically, Nicole and Renita felt that there were still difficulties to overcome. Nicole felt their themes should be "broader" in scope. Renita felt that too many times, their thematic units had been "thrown together" and that if they were going to teach thematically, then all six of them needed to plan together more.

All of the teachers subscribed to Gardner's (1990) theory of teaching to the multiple intelligences. Both Ruth and Nicole felt strongly that in teaching multiage children, it was very challenging to meet the variety of interests and learning styles that the children possessed. Renita and Ruth felt that they needed to pull in more resources and speakers from the community to provide students with different experiences.

Several other isolated challenges were identified by the teachers. Roberta and Renita noted that they felt they had allowed their classrooms to become too teacher directed at times. Roberta also pondered whether or not the curriculum was "developmentally sound." She posited that because of the problems with her first year problematic student, something was amiss. She was the only teacher who felt that a multiage composition of kindergarten, first and second graders was desirable. With other kindergartners in her multiage classroom, she thought, students like Danny might not feel as frustrated.

Anne explained that it had taken time for her to get used to the "higher noise level" that was due to increased student interaction in her multiage classroom. Ruth admitted that she was perplexed sometimes to find her students wasting time and exhibiting off task behaviors.

The Need for More Materials. Five of the participants expressed a need for more materials to serve the varying needs of the children in their multiage classrooms. Each of the teachers believed that Gardner's (1990) theory of multiple intelligences implied a need for materials that would meet children's aesthetic, physical, social, and emotional needs. For the primary age children, many materials, such as art materials, sand, and clay, were easily consumed.

Ruth vocalized that she though it was "horrible" to add a new teacher, Renita, and not supply her with needed resources. Ruth noted, and Renita agreed, that Renita had to "beg and borrow all year long." Renita, Nicole, and Anne felt that more materials were needed for the emergent reader. They felt that many of their emergent readers needed additional instruction with lower-level books.

Roberta thought she lacked materials for her more capable students. She felt she needed to challenge and interest them with materials that were creative and self-pacing. Ruth felt more materials that encourage self-direction and independent work were needed. Each of the teachers would like more technology in their classrooms, such as multimedia computers with printers.

Challenges Resulting from the Complexity of Nongradedness. The history of nongradedness has been a prolific and problematic one, as addressed in chapter one. This inherent complexity represented a challenge and a source of frustration for the teachers. Four of the participants raised issues that demonstrate the complexities surrounding the definition of nongradedness in three ways. First, as documented by the cross-case analysis of the first research question, teachers varied in their implementation of nongradedness. It will be shown in this section that the teachers varied concerning the use of nongradedness for struggling students. Second, some of the teachers identified teaching strategies that they felt were critical to having a successful multiage program. They felt the challenge was for teachers to be able to successfully incorporate these strategies into their nongraded program. Third, the teachers experienced difficulties educating and convincing the new principal that nongradedness was a necessary and effective educational program.

Dana felt that other teachers were making a mistake promoting certain children that were struggling in the primary unit. In her opinion and definition of nongradedness, the program should ensure that certain children would be given additional time to fulfill the objectives of the primary curriculum. Thus, if some students needed three years, then they should remain in the program rather than being sent on to third grade. Dana provided examples of the type of students she felt would benefit from spending additional time in the primary program.

Dana was concerned about each students' lack of academic progress and their personal habits. She explained that one boy had been a very disruptive student and while his behavior was better, it was " not necessarily good." Another boy needed badly to "experience success" with school, Dana believed. She told the researcher that the "chances of him finishing high school are not very good." She added that "if he went on to third grade, everything would be too hard. He would be overwhelmed." She spoke of another girl who, if she were in a second grade, "would be doing nothing. In fact, she doesn't even do much first grade work." Lastly, she discussed another girl who "may be a good candidate to keep" for additional time. She knew her family well, and spoke of the girl's potential, knowing that she needed time to develop. Thus, her view of curriculum was that its purpose was to serve the needs of the children.

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and to give them whatever time they needed, even if it meant more time in the primary unit. She believed strongly that there were many other children in the other primary classes that were like the ones she described, yet they were being sent to third grade. As the teachers had mixed views on the retention policy for their program, this demonstrated another complexity of the nongraded definition.

Both Renita and Nicole maintained that certain teaching strategies were integral components of the nongraded definition. As Nicole posited, a multiage classroom would not be as motivating if the teacher did not use a "hands on approach to teaching science." While stressing that multiage classrooms did not use textbooks, Renita believed that the whole language philosophy was compatible with teaching in this type of setting. Dana reported that when she and Roberta attended a conference on multiage two years before the program began, the presenter had discussed the importance of team teaching and whole language in preparing to teach in a multiage classroom. Each of the teachers acknowledged the importance of addressing various student learning styles, multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1990), and ongoing and continuous assessment as being important parts of the definition of nongradedness. These various essential components of nongradedness, as noted by some of the teachers, demonstrated that the complex definition of nongradedness can result in various challenges for those trying to teach multiage children.

Lastly, the teachers did not feel they had successfully explained the multiage philosophy or definition to the new principal. For the 1996-1997 school year, two less multiage units were being offered. Roberta and Dana thought that if they were able to proceed with multiage for at least two more years, many of the complex issues would become less enigmatic. To summarize, data analysis revealed that the complexities surrounding the definition of nongradedness can be a source of frustrations and challenges.

Increased Preparation. The teachers all agreed that starting a new program required additional preparation. As each of the teachers had volunteered to pilot this program, this was not perceived as a major challenge. The teachers had devoted a great deal of time the summer before the implementation of this program creating checklists and a report card that combined the first and second grade curricula and planning thematic units. Additionally, these teachers discovered that teaching in a multiage classroom required more preparation than teaching in a traditional classroom. Dana summarized this challenge when she noted how she felt a "responsibility to teach so many things." The teachers found that because of the need to individualize and plan for small group instruction, planning was more extensive than if they were simply planning for whole group instruction.

Undesirable Student Behavior. Ruth was the only teacher to raise this issue. She had experienced difficulties with her older students the first year of the program, many of whom were transferees. She wondered if their behavior and lack of progress was due to the presence of the first graders as she felt she was not exposing the second graders to enough of the second grade curriculum. Ruth also voiced the concern that, during the second year of the program, some of her children in the multiage classroom were not anxious to help others. She also found it a challenge to eliminate the competitive environment in her classroom and wished for students that were more intrinsically motivated.

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Cross-Case Analysis of Research Question #3

The third research question that guided this study asked, What are the perceived benefits which emerge when a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program is implemented? The six teachers perceived benefits across seven different categories that resulted during the implementation of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program: supportive classroom environment, learning various roles, development of students' social and emotional aspects, time, knowledge of students, higher expectations, and variety and choice.

Supportive Classroom Environment. The six participants felt that children in a nongraded, multiage classroom benefitted from the type of support they received from each other. As Anne told her students, she was the "big teacher" and they were all "mini teachers." Roberta claimed that it was like having "22 teachers in the room" with her. Renita posited that "if they get stuck" her students have a "support group" to help with solutions. The following classroom activity in Nicole's classroom illustrates how students helped and learned from each other:

> Two girls of different abilities had been working together to complete an activity with the newspaper. When they showed the researcher their menus, it was obvious that tasks of varying difficulty were expected of them. However, the more able child had been able to assist the less capable child in completing her required tasks. The less capable child told the researcher, "We get to make silly putty. Not the whole class, just us. 'Cuz we was doing good on our folders."

Dana and Nicole pointed out that in such a supportive environment, students receive more immediate feedback. Nicole felt that the teaching that existed in her multiage classroom was similar to the teaching that exists in families by which older children mentor their siblings. As a result of such support, student learning is enhanced, the teachers believed. Nicole was pleased to discover that when students completed projects, such as the making of pop-up books, students were able to help each other, making the completion of the task much easier. Ruth noted that such support was evident, especially when students worked together on the computer.

Each of the six teachers described a classroom climate that was more productive as a result of the support the multiage children extended to one another. They described the children in this atmosphere as being busy and actively engaged the majority of time. Dana explained how, as students learn to become independent workers, they learn "to use their time wisely." Ruth explained how at times, her students became "engrossed" in their present tasks. Five of the teachers felt that students were better behaved as they noted less discipline problems as compared with previous years of teaching at Central.

Renita described how students were able to pursue tasks "without teacher intervention." Because of the help students were able to receive from each other, Dana felt this enabled her to trust them to complete so much more work independently because of the potential support from others. She explained:

> If they can't read something . . . if there is a direction or something that they can't read they can go ask someone what it says. In the survey question that they have everyday, it forces them to learn to work together and to help each other out.

As a result of this atmosphere, Dana and Roberta felt that students were more inquisitive. Roberta gave the example of how her multiage classroom had worked together to plan her birthday party. Anne pointed out that cooperation, rather than competition, was emphasized in her multiage classroom.

Learning Various Roles. The six participants all believed that children are more likely to assume leadership roles in a multiage classroom. Nicole discussed how one child had become less disruptive because he perceived himself as a "leader and a mentor." Anne, Renita, Nicole, and Dana theorized that because of the inherent diversity in a multiage class, this composition made it more likely for students to be able to become leaders. As Nicole perceived, the students had the opportunity to witness both "expert and novice" characteristics in the same setting.

Roberta pointed out that in a nongraded, multiage classroom, students were able to achieve rank "regardless of ability." In comparing the children in a multiage classroom to siblings of varying ages, she posited that in this scenario, but not in a family, everyone became an "elder." Renita observed that many of the children in her class were the only children in their families. She felt their exposure to the multiage classroom had benefitted them in that they had learned to lead and cooperate. Renita theorized that these were characteristics that the stereotypical "only child" sometimes lacked.

Teachers also perceived that in a multiage classroom, there is more of an opportunity for children to serve as and be exposed to proper role models. Dana felt that the students learned many positive characteristics through modeling, such as cooperation instead of competition. Roberta thought the multiage classroom presented an opportunity for students to learn more readily from other role models. She gave the example of struggling readers who did not seem to become frustrated because they witnessed so much reading going on around them, and they knew they would eventually learn to read. Renita felt the younger children benefitted from the older students' examples as they learned to emulate the helpfulness of the older children.

Nicole, Ruth, and Anne each expressed how much they felt their children enjoyed serving as teachers. Ruth felt the children had enjoyed sharing all the "things they know." Anne maintained that achievement was enhanced as she pointed out that learning is not fully developed "until you teach it to somebody else."

The Development of Students' Social and Emotional Aspects. Each of the teachers felt that the students in their classrooms were better adjusted and happier as a result of being in a multiage classroom. Nicole stated she had witnessed both social and academic growth. While noting that her children seemed happy and confident, Anne further contended this program "bolsters their self esteem." She added that she felt her children enjoy school and experience less anxiety, mostly because they know the teacher so well. Roberta also considered the program a "self esteem booster." She discussed how she had "bonded" with a vexatious child who had no mother at home.

> He's not experienced ... close relationships with people. But because I had him last year, I kept him as part of our multiage this year and the difference it has made is phenomenal. And I think a great deal of it has to do with that steady relationship with me.

The teachers all felt that many friendships had formed between the children and students were comfortable in this environment. Ruth observed that younger children would eagerly demonstrate to the older children some of the concepts they had learned. Ruth and Renita posited that the children were more likely to take risks in their instruction. Ruth maintained that there was "no fear of failure here." Renita felt that children were more likely to become risk takers because of the support they received not only from her but from the other children in the room. Dana explained that in a multiage classroom, children were never isolated, there was always someone they could work with. She felt that because the philosophy of multiage is to respect the individual tendencies of children, they are "allowed to be who they are" and this contributes to better social and emotional stability.

Ruth and Roberta both maintained that the children are more tolerant and accepting of others in a multiage classroom. Roberta often spoke of her problematic students that the other students had learned to be patient with and support. Roberta felt that in this program, she had witnessed the blooming of children who had earned the opportunity to "shed a negative image" that they might have carried with them to second grade if they were in a traditional, graded program.

Anne, Renita, and Dana felt strongly that in a multiage classroom, children of lower ability receive more opportunities to serve as helpers and leaders, thereby raising their self esteem. Anne felt that in a traditional classroom, these same students would not experience opportunities to lead and to help. Renita pointed out that she would purposefully select a less able student to serve the role of tutor in appropriate situations. In a traditional classroom, Renita posited, that "division" of "A and F students" is much more evident.

Time. When some of the teachers were asked by the superintendent to discuss what they liked best about nongradedness at the spring of 1995 board meeting, Anne told him and the board of education:

> I think that one advantage is really getting to know the children by having the children for two years. You're able to spend time really getting to know them, learning their various idiosyncrasies and where they are. Children need that security and continuity, it's especially important for young children. Basically, the children know you, and they know what to expect.

The teachers felt strongly that since they would have most of their students for at least two years, time was an inherent benefit in the structure of the multiage program. Each of the teachers emphasized that it was beneficial to have two school years to accomplish learning goals and objectives. They also felt that multiage served as a viable alternative to retention since many of their first grade students would have been potential failures. The subject of retention was previously discussed as representing one of the challenges caused by the complex nongraded definition. In this study, some of the teachers had retained students for an additional third year in the primary program. Dana and Renita were the only teachers that kept students for an extra year as they felt the students would benefit from having more time in the primary program.

Anne expressed that as a teacher, you "have more invested" in the students as a result of being responsible for their learning for at least two years. Roberta felt more compelled to "stay on top of things" because of the time invested in her students. She also shared that she felt more patient in that she had time to observe the "incubation process" that

children experience in their development. She explained how the experience of teaching in a multiage program has "opened ... [her] eyes" to the growth and development of primary children.

Because the teacher does not have to push the students toward meeting the superficially imposed grade level standards in the time of one year, Nicole felt she was able to create a climate in which children could compete with themselves. Ruth felt that as a result of having more time to teach her students, she was more likely to grasp teachable moments. She explained that multiage teachers do not worry as much about students reaching a particular level of achievement at a particular time.

Renita, Roberta, Anne, and Dana each discussed the relationships and bonds they had established with children as a result of having additional time with children in their multiage classroom. Anne felt that primary children benefitted from the "continuity and security" that they received as a result of the time spent with her. Renita and Roberta thought that the time that they had spent with their students contributed significantly to the social and emotional bonds they had developed with their students. Dana had kept a child for an additional year as he had progressed slowly until she had discovered his learning style and tendencies. Dana predicted that the child would probably regress if she passed him as the third grade teacher would "waste time" trying to get to know him and his various idiosyncracies.

Knowledge of Students. The teachers perceived that spending more time with children increased the teachers' ability to gain in-depth knowledge about their students. Thus, this greater knowledge constituted another benefit. Each of the teachers believed that they had become more aware of their students' strengths and weaknesses as a result of the implementation of a nongraded program.

Their philosophy of teaching for continuous progress may explain why each of the teachers became so aware of each students' capabilities. Roberta contended that due to the assessments that are conducted in teaching for continuous progress, children's exact "needs are known" and a "more accurate gauge" of the child's progress is available. Teachers in a multiage program must individualize or progress will suffer. As Nicole pointed out, the teacher is much more aware of student progress in terms of "academics, behavior, and socialization." Ruth noted that knowing her students' personalities and abilities made it much easier for her to individualize instruction. While Anne stated that she knew her students well enough to ascertain "where they are and who to push," Dana maintained that the main advantage of the multiage, continuous progress program is that the teacher always "knows what's next" in anticipating children's development.

Each teacher thought that most importantly, teaching in a multiage classroom was synonymous with teaching to the individual. "It is the child first," surmised Dana. Three of the teachers, Renita, Dana, and Anne, made references to "watching" children perform various tasks and how these observations enhanced their awareness of student capabilities. Anne shared how her class would celebrate signs of individual growth. Roberta felt that in her classroom, students worked hard toward achieving their full potential. Roberta explained how she was surprised to learn she knew her students well enough to effortlessly complete narrative reports on their progress.

Higher Expectations. Each of the teachers felt that in a multiage classroom, their expectations for student achievement were higher. Because they often taught the curriculum of the older students, they explained that their

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expectations for children's performance were based upon the children's true potential. Dana reflected that this approach was similar to the one room schoolhouses whereby concepts that were presented to older students were often assimilated by the younger students, too. Renita maintained that when she taught a whole group lesson, concepts had "filtered down" to the younger students.

Roberta explained how she evolved into becoming truly child centered in the teaching of multiage children. Before, she felt she had taught according to the "ceilings and floors" that were implied by grade-level standards. Robert thought, "There are no beginning points and no ending points [in a nongraded class] as they progress more and they expand more." Anne felt that her younger students were presented with "a vision of what's to come and that could be motivational in that you know where you are headed."

Each of the teachers offered concrete examples of how students had benefitted from the higher expectations that were implied in their classrooms. Ruth had younger children learning cursive writing while Nicole felt some of her students had learned to use encyclopedias and word processing on the computer because of the expectations held for other students. Renita offered the example of younger children learning the concept of alphabetical order while Anne noted that she had some traditional first graders learning regrouping and multiplication, lessons they would probably never have been introduced to in a traditional first grade classroom.

Renita pointed out that the older students were also expected to work to their full potential. Because of the philosophy of teaching for continuous progress, the instruction does not come to a halt due to superficial, grade-level standards. Both Renita and Nicole had discussed giving their second grade students third grade work because of their goal for continuous progress.

Variety and Choice. The teachers perceived that variety and choice were necessary components of their nongraded definition. Each of the teachers thought that with the wide range of interests and abilities that existed in their classrooms, it was imperative that they offer variety and choices to their students. They each felt that students benefitted and enjoyed being able to choose and have variety as part of their multiage experience.

The multiage students were exposed to a variety of teaching styles from the teachers who instructed them. As both teams engaged in the team teaching of various thematic units, the students were exposed to the teaching styles of the other teachers on their team. Each classroom was also visited by resource teachers that worked with individuals and small groups.

Nicole explained how she would present open-ended tasks that would enable students to respond in a developmentally appropriate manner. For example, students might reply to a writing prompt with a picture and a short caption while others might write "novellas." Renita, Anne, and Roberta maintained that they allowed the children to choose the curriculum they wanted to pursue at various times. For example, students in Anne's class chose to learn multiplication, even though Anne had not introduced it to them. Similarly, a child in Roberta's class began teaching herself cursive print. Renita stressed that she encouraged children to pursue divergent responses to the projects she assigned. She gave the example how when students were writing form letters, some children would deviate from the

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form and produce their own letter. Nicole and Renita felt that the decision making which students engaged in to select items for their portfolios helped their development.

During part of Roberta's morning routine, the students chose their own groups to pursue activities such as reading science books and doing experiments or choosing to work with whatever materials were available. She explained how this decision had evolved:

> I don't assign them anymore. Looking back, that was necessary, that was good. It gave the children instruction or routine and an organization to the class. Now they have that. I just say, "Any center you want." And it is interesting to see what they choose. They are multiage, mixed groups.

Four of the teachers discussed how they used menus to enable students to engage in making choices. Students were able to choose which activity they would complete first and with whom they wanted to work. Roberta felt having these choices was very motivational as she admitted that she would hate to be told what to do all of the time. Ruth posited that the multiage classroom was a better setting for encouraging problem solving and decision making than graded classrooms. In graded classrooms, she felt the teacher was so concerned with meeting grade level objectives that the teacher did not enjoy enough flexibility to offer variety and choice.

Conclusions

The intent of this study was to examine teacher perceptions during the implementation of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program. The findings of this research supported the conclusion that during the implementation process, the six teachers varied in their definition of nongradedness and they also perceived various challenges and benefits. Previous attempts at nongradedness have supported the notion that the complex nongraded definition has been misunderstood and oversimplified. For this reason, an operational definition was used to guide this study. Through observations and interviews, the researcher found that the six participants exhibited various consistencies and inconsistencies in their application of the nongraded definition. By analyzing these consistencies and inconsistencies, the researcher learned the distinct characteristics of the six teachers' nongraded definition. The challenges and benefits that emerged from this study were a result of the teachers' perceptions of the struggles and successes they faced as they applied their definition of nongradedness.

Some of the challenges and benefits will be highlighted as a basis for discussion in the next section. First, some of the challenges will be presented as tensions that have implications for classroom management and programs of preservice and inservice teacher education. After that, the implications that the six teachers' preparation presented will be discussed. Then, the challenges that were caused by the administration will be presented in conjunction with the implications this challenge poses for educational reform. Finally, some of the benefits that were perceived by the teachers will be offered as they relate to the theme of student satisfaction.

Tensions Presenting Implications for Classroom Management and Teacher Education

Some of the challenges that emerged from this study presented implications for teacher education programs, educators, and policy makers. In the following section, they will be highlighted as tensions. The teachers experienced various tensions as they were challenged by trying to accomplish certain goals that they knew were important to the

nongraded definition. These tensions suggested implications for classroom management strategies for multiage teachers as well as the preservice and inservice programs of teacher education that may help teachers resolve such tensions. Four tensions that will be discussed in this section include: tensions surrounding the grouping of students; tensions concerning assessment; tensions pertaining to individualized instruction; and tensions with integrating instruction.

Tensions surrounding the grouping of students. The teachers at Central Elementary varied in their organizational approach that dealt with the grouping of children. Some of the teachers had difficulty forming groups that were flexible and non-permanent in composition while one teacher admitted to relying predominantly on the use of high, medium, and low-ability groups. All six teachers believed children should be organized in temporary homogeneous and heterogeneous arrangements during the course of the day. However, only two of the teachers changed their grouping compositions on a regular basis. The tension that existed was caused by the knowledge that the teachers wanted to create more flexible groups, yet they struggled to accomplish this.

In a discussion on authentic nongradedness, Robert Anderson (1995) stressed that the grouping of students is critical to the operational definition of any nongraded program. According to the operational definition guiding this study, grouping and subgrouping patterns should be extremely flexible as "learners are grouped and regrouped on the basis of one specific task or interest and groups are disbanded when that objective is reached" (Anderson, 1995; Anderson & Pavan, 1993). However, creating such groups is not always easy to accomplish. In a study of a nongraded project in New York City, the authors found that the grouping of children represented one of the main challenges in beginning their program (Jarvis & Zak, 1989). The data collected in this study of Central teachers provided further evidence that creating flexible student groups can be difficult to achieve.

The findings of this research suggested that as teachers struggled with meeting the varying interests and needs of their multiage students, they needed better classroom management methods for incorporating more flexible grouping schemes into their routine. One Central teacher purposefully used Wednesdays as the day for meeting with groups that were different from the groups she met with on other days. Another teacher discussed the creation of flexible groups that was formulated on a specific need or interest. For example, she had used both homogeneous and heterogeneous ability groups to help students learn how to write reports. It appears that teachers can effectively manage more flexible and temporary groups by utilizing different grouping patterns on a particular day of the week or purposefully creating groups on the basis of different needs and interests. Therefore, the grouping of students becomes an important consideration for the multiage teachers' classroom management strategies.

Some of the Central teachers used an approach to classroom management they referred to as menus. Menus present a management tool that could help teachers organize their grouping patterns with students. For example, teachers could devise a system that would address the various student groups formed on the basis of students' specific interests and needs. On this menu, the tasks might include, "Meet with report-writing group on Thursday after morning meeting" or "Meet with book discussion group on Wednesday after lunch." Therefore, students would be meeting on a regular basis with temporarily assembled groups that were based upon their needs and interests. The teachers had learned about menus at a professional conference that they had attended voluntarily. This suggests that useful topics and

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techniques, such as menus, might be incorporated into preservice and inservice teacher education programs so that teachers are exposed to worthwhile classroom management techniques.

The issues surrounding classroom management are not limited to the type of instructional tools that teachers might employ. Classroom management can also entail the teaching of specific student behaviors. For example, each of the teachers in this study stressed how important it was for them to teach students "how to act" in their multiage classrooms. The researcher referred to these classroom management issues as nonacademic aspects of the curriculum. The learning objectives included teaching students how to tutor, solve problems, follow classroom routines, and proceed with self-initiated projects. These perceptions about the importance of these classroom management strategies suggested that for preservice and inservice teacher education programs, instructional time should not only be devoted to teaching content-area methods but also to teaching classroom management strategies that will facilitate the mastery of nonacademic objectives.

Lastly, the teachers in this study varied in their use of grouping schemes for literacy instruction. They varied in their use of literature, leveled books, basal readers and workbooks. The teachers also differed in their use of individualized literacy instruction and spelling instruction. The conflict that must be addressed by teacher education programs is that while teachers know that the three-group approach to teaching reading is poor reading instruction, some appear to be unable to abandon these tendencies (Hall & Cunningham, 1992). The results of this study suggested that if teachers could learn better classroom management techniques, they might escape the habitual three-group approach to reading.

Tensions concerning assessment. The teachers felt that maintaining individual documentation on each of their students represented a challenge. As a classroom management issue, they also wished they had spent more time conferring with their students regarding assessments. Each of the six teachers relied on checklists and running records (Clay, 1993) for compiling the documentation that they felt was needed in a multiage classroom. Some of the teachers identified various challenges with the report card. One teacher felt that the report card, which was a checklist, did not supply enough information for parents to help their children improve. Two of the teachers noted that the report card did provide an evaluation of the child's progress in all areas. They felt that they might include an assessment of student progress in aesthetic and physical development. One teacher felt that the six teachers should work to be more uniform and consistent in their assessments. The six teachers also varied in their use of portfolio assessment.

The study of Central teachers suggested that the teachers' difficulties in performing regular assessments of student progress paralleled the teachers' difficulties with trying to utilize flexible grouping patterns. Anderson and Pavan (1993) stressed that multiage teachers should involve students in the assessment process and use "multiple sources," such as portfolios, for documenting student progress (p. 89). As the teachers varied in their ability to involve students in the assessment process and the degree and regularity in which they completed running records (Clay, 1993), these results suggested that the teachers struggled with conducting the type of assessments they felt were needed in their multiage classrooms.

Previous research identified that assessment is a main part of the nongraded definition and important for teaching for continuous progress (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). These authors maintained that assessment should consider all five areas of the child's development: aesthetic, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Anderson & Pavan). However, assessment is an area that educators have struggled with during other innovations. A previous study of an innovation in literacy instruction revealed that teachers were challenged by their attempts to document and assess student progress (Scharer, 1992c). The results of the current study suggested that while teachers recognized the importance of continuous and persistent evaluation of all phases of development of the primary child, it was a challenge to do so.

The tensions that the teachers experienced as they attempted to conduct the type of assessments that were important for multiage children suggested that teachers needed more support to resolve these tensions. In chapter two, Gaustad's (1996) ideas for assessment in the multiage classroom were presented. Gaustad maintained that tools of authentic assessment, such as observations, anecdotal records, rating scales, systematic observational assessments, paper-and-pencil tests, frequent conversations with students, and portfolios, were appropriate methods for documenting student progress in a multiage classroom. In this study, the Central teachers used different types of assessments to varying degrees. However, they felt challenged to incorporate assessment into their routine; they each expressed never having enough time. Therefore, as part of their approach to classroom management, they might explore ways to incorporate the authentic assessments advocated by Gaustad into their routine. The implication for teacher education programs is that teachers must not only be familiar with various types of assessment, they must also be prepared with classroom management strategies that will enable these assessments to become part of class routine.

In closing, assessment is a very critical component of any nongraded, multiage continuous progress program. As the teachers struggled with this issue, its importance suggested a need for administrative support. This will be discussed further in the section on challenges caused by the administration.

Tensions pertaining to individualized instruction. Anderson and Pavan (1993) stressed that the curriculum of the ideal nongraded program is child-centered as it is based upon the child's "unique needs, interests, abilities, learning rates, styles, patterns" (pp. 80-81). The results of the current study documented that as each teacher facilitated instruction through whole-group, small-group, and occasional individualized instruction, they felt challenged by their inability to individualize instruction. In the ideal nongraded classroom, all phases of individual child development are considered when planning instruction (Anderson & Pavan). However, if the Central teachers were not meeting with individual learners on a regular basis, then it is highly unlikely that they were considering all phases of development and individual learning styles.

The data collected in this study documented that only one teacher met with individual students on a regular basis. She organized her schedule so that every Wednesday, she met with individuals to provide instruction, select books for further reading, and discuss reading progress. However, her implementation of individualized instruction was limited to the subject of reading. Perhaps other teachers that would attempt to implement nongradedness would find that in individualizing their instruction, they could encompass other areas, in addition to reading, in which the child would

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benefit from individual instruction. For example, if a child was struggling with certain math concepts or even nonacademic aspects of the curriculum, the student might benefit from receiving individual attention to these areas.

The ability to individualize instruction in all areas of the curriculum has proven to be problematic, as documented by the current study. An important observation about nongradedness summarizes the instructional demands the multiage teacher faces:

> A teacher cannot ignore developmental differences in students nor be ill-prepared for a day's instruction. Demands on teacher time require well developed organizational skills. The multigrade classroom is not for the timid, inexperienced or untrained teacher. (Miller, 1991, p. 3)

One of the Central teachers, who was not projected to teach in the multiage program for the 1996-1997 school year, admitted that she was not an organized person. One of the conclusions that might be drawn is that her lack of organizational skills, which Miller (1991) stressed were vital for teaching multiage children, was one of the reasons why she was no longer scheduled to teach a nongraded classroom. Thus, for those that would attempt to implement nongradedness, they would be wise to consider how their organizational skills would affect their ability to teach in a multiage classroom.

The individualization of literacy instruction has been addressed by previous studies. As the teachers in the current study varied in their approaches to literacy instruction, this suggests an area of concern for potential multiage teachers. Researchers and theorists maintained that for the teaching of literacy in the nongraded, multiage classroom, teachers subscribing to the whole language philosophy (Goodman, K., 1989; Goodman, Y., 1989) are thought to be better suited for nongradedness (Anderson & Pavan, 1993; Chase & Doan, 1994). In addition to whole language, principles which support Marie Clay's Reading Recovery (1993) have been endorsed for nongraded programs because of the way in which the teacher is able to meet the needs of the individual (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). Hall and Cunningham (1992) advocated a multimethod, multilevel approach for first grade reading instruction that enables teachers to individualize reading instruction. By learning more about these approaches to literacy, teachers might become more proficient in attending to the instructional needs of their multiage students.

Considering that teachers in this study struggled with individualizing their instruction, the results suggest the need for better classroom management and implications for programs of teacher education. As addressed previously, using a classroom management technique, such as menus, might enable teachers to create flexible groups and individualize their instruction. Programs of both preservice and inservice teacher education might examine their efforts to expose students to management strategies that enable teachers to individualize and to literacy instruction that also serves this goal.

Tensions with integrating instruction. Anderson and Pavan (1993) maintained that "broad thematic units integrating several subject matter disciplines are utilized" in the ideal nongraded classroom (p. 81). One of the Central teachers explained that the multiage curriculum was more theme oriented than grade oriented. She stressed that, "Instead of teaching grade one math, you teach addition. You don't teach grade one science, you teach plants."

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The tension that surfaced in regard to integrated instruction was that while the teachers in this study recognized the importance of integrating their instruction, they felt challenged to integrate the curriculum more. The Central teachers believed that they facilitated a type of instruction that encouraged the students to make meaningful connections. In doing so, they tried to avoid the type of fragmented skills' instruction that has dominated primary classrooms for the past several years (Gaustad, 1996).

Each of the teachers planned instruction using thematic units to varying degrees. According to one of the teachers, a goal for the summer after the first year of the program was to plan more thematic units. Considering that the value of thematic and integrated learning has been given greater consideration in recent years and has been linked with recent findings on brain activity (Caine & Caine, 1990) the value of this type of instruction presents considerations for potential nongraded teachers.

The type of instruction that characterizes thematic, integrated instruction is important to not only nongradedness but to other areas of education as well. Movements in math, language arts, and science education are all straying from the emphasis of skill acquisition and rote learning, also known as "surface knowledge" (Caine & Caine, p. 7). This type of instruction that encourages integration is also known as brain-based education and is becoming more prevalent as educators become aware of the fascinating capabilities the brain encompasses. While surface knowledge consists of the type of knowledge and specific skills a robot may be capable of, meaningful knowledge is much more forgiving, rather, it is anything that makes sense. For example, "A child who appreciates a plant as a miracle approaches the study of plants differently from a child who engages in a task" (Caine & Caine, p. 7). Thematic and integrated teaching take advantage of the brain's ability to make meaningful connections. Brain-based education involves anything the teacher can do to ensure that students' experiences increase their ability to extract meaning. The challenge for the teacher is to orchestrate lifelike and appropriate experiences which include a "tolerance for ambiguity, problem solving, questioning, patterning . . . [and] use of metaphor, similes, and demonstrations" (Caine & Caine, 1990, p. 8).

The results of this study suggested that for those implementing nongradedness, teachers must consider how the research of Caine and Caine (1990) supports the use of thematic teaching which is important to the nongraded definition. As thematic teaching and brain-based education become more prevalent, programs of teacher education might provide teachers with both the means for integrating instruction as well as the rationale, which would inform teachers about brain-based education.

In closing, four tensions were discussed in light of the implications they suggested for classroom management strategies and for preservice and inservice teacher education programs. In the next section, the six teachers' reflections about their preparation will be presented.

Preparation Concerns

The Central teachers' perceptions about the type of preparation needed to begin a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program contributed to the identification of the type of support potential multiage teachers may need. Those attempting nongradedness should heed the six participants' comments about preparation. These six

teachers reviewed the body of literature that was available on this subject, attended professional conferences, and visited other multiage programs to get answers to their most pressing questions. These teachers also identified various resources, such as Activities Integrating Math and Science, Math Their Way, and Reading Recovery tools from Marie Clay's An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (1993) that were critical for teaching in a multiage classroom. Also, some of the teachers raised the possibility that teachers who subscribed to the whole language philosophy were more prepared to teach in a multiage classroom. Two of the teachers felt their preservice preparation, one as a special education teacher, the other as a psychology minor, had made them better prepared for teaching in a nongraded, multiage classroom.

Therefore, potential multiage teachers might begin with a self-assessment of their abilities to successfully implement a nongraded curriculum before commencing with their own program. For example, if they do not have the ability to teach for continuous progress, conduct regular assessments, or integrate across the curriculum, nongradedness might prove to be a difficult endeavor. The results from this study suggested that visiting other multiage programs, attending multiage conferences, and creating study groups to review current classroom management techniques and new instructional methods in the various content areas will provide some support for the potential multiage teacher.

These results also seem to support the notion that the preservice training that some of the teachers received had a bearing on their abilities to teach in a nongraded, multiage program. Researchers and theorists posited that a major shortcoming of colleges and universities has been their failure to introduce preservice teachers to nongradedness (Gayfer, 1991; Lewis, 1969; Miller, 1991). Miller contended that teacher education programs have trained teachers to teach in single grades only. Therefore, teacher education programs might expose their students to the concept of the nongraded, multiage continuous progress program.

Challenges Caused by the Administration: Implications for Educational Reform

The data in this study suggested that the administration was the source of various challenges. During the first year of the program, one complaint against the administration was that they forced them to comply with the district's standardized testing policy. Robert Anderson (1995) stressed it is imperative for Boards of Education to provide the type of support that could involve obtaining "waivers regarding requirements and practices from the State Department of Education" (p. 1). In this case, the teachers were not even able to waive their own local boards' policies. Other evidence of a lack of administrative support was that five of the teachers felt that they were not furnished with adequate materials to begin a new program. One teacher felt that it was "horrible" for the administration to approve a pilot program without proper funding.

The shift of administration may have contributed to some of the perceived challenges. During the first year of the program, both the superintendent and principal were very supportive of this program. The principal had attended a summer conference with four of the teachers and the superintendent had maintained that his experiences teaching in a developmentally appropriate curriculum provided him with an understanding and appreciation of nongradedness. Unfortunately, this support did not last long for these dedicated and hard-working teachers as during the second year of the program, the administrative personnel changed.

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The majority of problems with the administration can be attributed to the challenges that emerged in relation to the new principal. In the second year of the program, the new principal required them to abandon the primary report card they had created in favor of the school district's first and second grade report cards. She also decided to drop two multiage units and offer, in their place, one first and one second grade class. During the second year, the teachers felt defensive about their program and began to wonder about its future. As one of the teachers pointed out, the new administration did not seem to value authentic assessment. Some of the teachers believed that the new principal was relying on standardized tests rather than the teachers' methods of documentation to examine the program's effectiveness. Thus, they were not receiving the type of support and "waivers" that Robert Anderson (1995) encouraged.

The frustrations the six teachers experienced may have been due to what Michael Fullan has termed "the implementation dip" (cited in Sykes, 1996, p. 467). As participants in the implementation process, the teachers suffered from the problems and confusion that are typical in the early phases of an innovation. Sykes (1996) described reform-minded professional development which emphasizes dialogue and feedback, stressing that if teachers persist in problem solving for improvement, they have a much better chance of succeeding. The implication is that teachers and administrators should engage in diagnostic problem solving while a reform is in progress. Such reflection should involve the examination of the factors that impede or promote the process. In this case, such reflection would help teachers and administrators identify, clarify, and reevaluate the problems and issues that surrounded the innovation. As Otto (1969) observed, "If a nongraded program is to fulfill its mission, many related facets of the internal organization of the school must be altered simultaneously" (p. 126). It appears that if teachers and administrators are given the opportunity to engage in a problem-solving approach, teachers might overcome the resultant obstacles of innovation. If such opportunities occur during a common planning time while school is in session, the teachers might perceive this as an example of administrative support. Unfortunately, the teachers in the present study felt frustrated by the administration's failure to address their concerns.

Fullan and Miles (1992) corroborated the contention that in dealing with change and the problems that accompany it, educators and policy makers should adhere to a diagnostic approach to problem solving. This suggests that the administrators and teachers in this study might benefit from engaging in the problem-solving process to resolve the tensions that were identified in the current study. For example, the teachers were frustrated by the new principal's positivistic approach toward the evaluation of their program. They were especially distressed by her reliance on standardized tests to document their program's effectiveness. As discussed in earlier chapters, there are limitations with using standardized tests to document the achievement of primary age children. However, if the teachers and administrators in Bellingham City Schools would follow a diagnostic approach to problem solving, they would seek different ways for evaluating the program's effectiveness. In chapter two, Gaustad's (1996) ideas for assessment in the multiage classroom were presented. Gaustad maintained that tools of authentic assessment provided appropriate methods for documenting student progress in a multiage classroom. Gaustad also advocated systematic observational assessments such as Marie Clay's (1993) assessment tools for evaluating student achievement. Therefore, if administrators are seeking ways to document the achievement of students in these multiage classrooms, they should

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utilize more authentic assessments and provide the necessary support that will enable their teachers to do so. As Fullan and Miles stated, "It's important to note that successful schools did not have fewer problems than other schools - they just coped with them better" (p. 750).

Researchers and theorists agree that we are at a critical juncture in educational reform and attempts at reform in the United States must not fail (Clark & Astuto, 1994). For reforms to be successful, they need full cooperation and support. Clark and Astuto contended, "External agencies should be worrying about how they can help and support these school units - not about how they can dominate them" (Clark & Astuto, p. 520). As in the case of this reform at Central Elementary, it may soon come to an end if the administration continues to show signs of opposition. In The Predictable Failure of Education Reform, Sarason (1990) maintained that those who try to implement changes in schools are doomed for failure because "any effort at reform has to have as its goal a change in existing power relationships in the system" (p. 46). Teachers must be empowered to institute the type of change that is often more lasting and more meaningful, local change (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Gough, 1994). The teachers in this study had volunteered to implement nongradedness; this was not a mandated change. Therefore, if they are truly empowered, they should be respected and supported in their efforts. Such empowerment might include collaboration with the administration to engage in a mutual problem-solving process as advocated by Sykes (1996), Fullan and Miles.

Reforms have little chance of being successful until the change process itself is better understood (Fullan & Miles, 1992). Some basic characteristics of change are that it is full of problems, uncertainties, is "resource-hungry" and is "a journey, not a blueprint" (Fullan & Miles, pp. 750 - 752). In this study, the data have shown that problems were identified and the journey was not without challenges. Also, one of the challenges that emerged in this study was that teachers perceived a need for more materials, especially for their emergent readers. Therefore, this innovation was typical of the change process described by Fullan and Miles. For those who would attempt nongradedness in their schools, they would be wise to consider the characteristics of change such as the perceived problems caused by the administration, the lack of materials, the tensions the teachers experienced and the other challenges that emerged as a result of the current study. Also, if teachers and administrators are going to engage in a problem-solving approach to educational reform, they might consider that change is often a slow process.

Student Satisfaction: A Desirable Outcome of Nongradedness

Some of the benefits that emerged from this study suggested that the overall theme of student satisfaction existed in these multiage classrooms. Teachers consistently perceived that their students were satisfied and comfortable. Previous research revealed overwhelming evidence that students in nongraded classrooms experience greater degrees of satisfaction than students in graded classrooms. Way (1981) found that nongraded classrooms experienced significantly higher scores in the area of happiness and satisfaction. This was corroborated by Pratt's (1983) contention that the multiage arrangement improves children's social and emotional well being. Additionally, Miller (1990) reviewed 21 studies which addressed student attitudes and social relationships and reported that multiage students outperformed single-graded students 81 percent of the time.

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The contribution of the current study is that while past researchers have claimed that students in nongraded classrooms generally experience greater degrees of satisfaction, this current research suggested some specific reasons why students in a nongraded, multiage classroom might experience improved student affect. For example, data collected from the present study suggested that the theme of student satisfaction may be related to four of the perceived benefits: a supportive classroom environment, the students learning to portray various roles, the development of students' social and emotional aspects, and the exposure of students to variety and choice. In this section, all four perceived benefits will be discussed separately before recommendations are presented.

First, the type of support that children in a multiage classroom receive was suggested by the review of research in chapter two. The resultant data of a study that examined student behavior in a nongraded setting showed that students implemented three types of strategies as they worked together: modeling, tutoring, and pairing/sharing (Dever, Zila & Manzano, 1994). Fromberg (1989) maintained that the multiage classroom, in which the teacher facilitates the learning of children from different ages, interests, and abilities, is a natural environment for peer tutoring. The results of this study suggested that as the nongraded teacher strives to keep all of her multiage students on task and actively engaged, it is imperative that students seek help from sources other than the teacher. The Central teachers believed that the diversity that existed in their multiage classrooms facilitated an exchange of services among the students.

In addition to the teacher, other students were capable of providing proper support and scaffolding their learning. As one teacher had observed, the multiage classroom was like having "22 teachers in the room" with her. The six teachers felt that because of the increased support they received from one another, students learned to work productively and independently.

Second, the six participants in the current study perceived that students in this program had benefitted from learning to portray various roles. They felt students had learned to lead, cooperate, help others, and serve as mentors and tutors. Most importantly, some of the teachers pointed out that low ability students were able to assume various roles that, in a traditional classroom, they might not have been exposed to because of their lack of ability. Therefore, all students, not just the bright ones, are able to engage in helping behaviors, the teachers believed. One teacher observed that, regardless of ability, each student eventually achieves the rank and privileges of being an "elder." Other existing research supported the notion that students in multiage classes enjoy and benefit from portraying various roles. Hunter (1992) contended that in the nongraded setting students are able to assume different roles which "is impossible at home, but at school it is not only possible but highly desirable" (p. 20). In a study of gifted children in a nongraded school, Hatenstein, Jordan, and Tucker (1993) reported that teachers felt that growth in students' leadership skills had occurred as a result of the change to a nongraded, multiage program. Thus, for students that enjoy being a helper, a leader, and engaging in other cooperative behavior, the results of this study suggested that such students would benefit from being able to portray these different roles.

Third, the teachers perceived that students' social and emotional development was enhanced by their involvement in this multiage program. The teachers spoke of the relationships and bonding that they had developed with

their students. Also, they felt that friendships and filial relationships had been formed among the students. Two of the teachers felt strongly that their children's self esteem had risen as a result of their participation in this program.

Four, the six teachers in this study felt that students benefitted from the variety and choice that they were exposed to in their multiage classrooms. Ideally, the nongraded school "strives to increase the variability of individual differences rather than to stress conformity" (Anderson & Pavan, 1993, p. 76). Similarly, "common assigned tasks encourage, suggest, and allow variability" (Anderson & Pavan, p. 76). The teachers in this study were very aware of the diversity that existed in their classrooms. They felt they encouraged creativity and unique thinking as they recognized the distinctive characteristics of their multiage children. The results of this study indicated that the teachers perceived themselves as facilitators that encouraged children to become more responsible for their own learning and to learn from other children and using a variety of sources.

To summarize, these four perceived benefits that emerged from this study suggested a theme of student satisfaction. The six teachers believed that students benefitted from the support they received from each other and learning to portray various roles. The teachers also believe that students' social and emotional development was enhanced and that the students enjoyed the variety and choice that characterized their multiage classrooms.

The emerging theme of student satisfaction is an important consideration for potential multiage educators and policy makers. While student satisfaction is a desirable outcome, potential multiage teachers should strive to replicate this outcome. This study suggested that as teachers work toward a goal, such as student satisfaction, they might use the four benefits to serve as outcomes for attempting to reach this goal. In the assessment of student learning in the multiage classroom, Gaustad (1996) stressed that compiling a list of desirable outcomes "is only the first step in a challenging process" (p. 25). The results of this study suggested that the various benefits that might contribute to overall student satisfaction represent some of the objectives and performance criteria needed for assessment in a multiage classroom.

In attempting to replicate the type of student satisfaction that was perceived by the teachers in this study, the first step would be to develop a "consensus among educators on the exact meaning of assessment criteria" (Gaustad, p. 26). For example, teachers might develop a rating scale in which they agree on the type of student behavior that leads to the four benefits that emerged in this study. In general, the rating scale that indicates students' level of mastery would relate to overall student satisfaction. Specifically, the items could relate to the benefits that the Central teachers believed led to student satisfaction, such as the supportive classroom environment they felt existed. A scale might include such behaviors as "Student seeks genuine help that is more than copying others" or "Student scaffolds learning by hinting at rather than telling answers." Similarly, this rating scale could help teachers monitor student progress toward another perceived benefit, the learning of various roles. The items referring to this objective might read "Student portrays the role of leader" and "Student is able to serve in more than one role." The items referring to the development of social and emotional aspects could state "Student is able to make friends" or "Student is confident enough to try new things." In evaluating the students' ability to partake in variety and choice, suggested items include "Student is excited when new activities are introduced" or "Student enjoys making choices."

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As potential multiage teachers collaborate on the performance criteria for rating scales, they should be cautioned that the use of rating scales can be overwhelming. However, the process of creating them is just as valuable as the tool itself as this endeavor often serves to provide a "theoretical context" for those engaged in the process (Gaustad, 1996, p. 29). Gaustad (1996) stressed that authentic assessments, such as rating scales, must be developed as part of an "ongoing process of discussion and mutual learning with colleagues" (p. 37).

In closing, the theme of student satisfaction is a desirable outcome for those wishing to implement their own nongraded program. The researcher presented four benefits that emerged from this study to suggest why students in nongraded, multiage programs might experience greater student affect. Also, as outlined by Gaustad's (1996) suggestions for authentic assessment in the multiage classroom, the researcher suggested the use of a rating scale to evaluate a multiage program's ability to replicate the perceived benefits that emerged from the present study.

Questions for Further Research

This study focused on teachers' perceptions as they engaged in the implementation of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program. Further topics for research remain concerning the issues surrounding a reform such as nongradedness. Also, in deference to the limitations of this study, a replication in another site might provide a broader context for the examination of data across different sites and perspectives.

Various issues arose during this study that suggested questions for further study. While these issues were not the primary focus of this study, they presented implications for researchers, educators, and policy makers contemplating nongradedness. Three issues will be discussed in this section before the questions for further research are listed.

First, data were not collected to support the claim that student achievement was facilitated as a result of the implementation of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program. At best, teachers discussed how they felt the program had positively affected the individual progress of certain students in their classrooms. Therefore, it was beyond the scope of this study to conclude that participation in the nongraded program at Central contributed to gains in student achievement. However, the results of this study may provide some evidence of reasons why students in nongraded classrooms outperform students in graded classrooms. The teachers in this study felt that their philosophy of teaching for continuous progress and the additional time spent with children contributed to a greater knowledge of their students' potential. Also, some of the teachers felt that, having had most of their students for two years, the students were familiar with their expectations and could spend more time pursuing academic objectives rather than learning classroom regimen. The teachers also perceived that they held higher expectations for their students as some of the first year students were learning objectives that exceeded grade-level standards. Therefore, the issues surrounding the question of student achievement provide a topic for further research.

Secondly, the teachers emphasized that student cooperation and intrinsic motivation were important attributes of a multiage classroom. Yet, they still relied upon characteristics of extrinsic motivation for behavior management in the form of behavior charts, prizes, and parties that encouraged competition among the children. The issue is that while their views on cooperation and motivation represented a departure from traditional thinking, some of their actions were

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typical of past assumptions about motivation. That is, in reality, they did not implement some of the principles they perceived to be important for nongradedness.

At various times, the teachers exhibited attributes of behaviorism, an approach to motivation that has exhibited a longstanding effect on learning theory in education. Behaviorists have maintained that children could be manipulated by creating conditions which help them to experience pleasure and avoid pain. The problem with those basic assumptions that require incentives and control mechanisms are that they conflict with "motivation theory and with principles of human growth and development" (Clark & Astuto, 1994, p. 515). These authors cited Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization to contrast the idea that human beings strive for personal fulfillment as opposed to the notion that people are unmotivated and disinterested in their own achievements and development (Clark & Astuto). They maintained that "true motivators are linked to personal growth and achievement" (Clark & Astuto, p. 515).
New ways, which discount traditional underlying assumptions, have grown together to become the core of the principles and philosophy of nongradedness. Goodlad and Anderson (1987) claimed that grade-mindedness "is based upon notions of motivation, of human development, and of human organization that are almost entirely outdated" (p. 162). In the atmosphere of cooperation among students and the collegiality of team teaching which characterizes the nongraded program, assumptions about motivation are the glue that holds the nongraded philosophy together. Unfortunately, many in the past have argued that competition for grades and threats of nonpromotion were needed to motivate students (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). Clark and Astuto (1994) posed the question of whether or not competition is actually conducive for creating desirable learning conditions and contended that:

> Self motivation is sustained when individuals maintain a sense of their own efficacy and work in a context in which people help one another develop skills, take risks, and challenge standard operating procedures. Competitive environments isolate people; cooperative environments bring people together and protect diversity, experience, preference, and interest. (p. 516)

The views of human potential and human motivation are considered to be much more perceptive and complete in the 1990's (Anderson & Pavan, 1993; Ramey & Ramey, 1994). Children are viewed as being eager to learn and capable of experiencing success in school. Early childhood specialists agreed that the most salient learning experiences "occur in the context of informal interaction and activities rather than through formal group instruction" (Katz, 1992, p. 201). Furthermore, fundamental principles for creating positive learning environments help to illuminate how children make meaning out of their world. The four principles which were outlined by Ramey and Ramey (1994) for establishing this climate are that:

> 1) The child see that he or she has an effect on the environment,
> 2) the child be embedded in a responsive environment,
> 3) the environment be one that is sufficiently interesting and complex to capture and hold the child's attention, [and]
> 4) the environment be trustworthy and comprehensible from the child's vantage point. (p. 198)

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The teachers in this study attempted to create the type of informal, less-structured environment advocated by theorists Katz (1992) and Ramey and Ramey (1994). They created instruction that was child-centered and they deviated from formal whole-group instruction, using learning centers and cooperative learning strategies daily. However, the issue is that while they attempted to facilitate instruction that encouraged cooperation and intrinsic motivation, they also utilized behavioristic tendencies that promoted competition and extrinsic motivation on the part of the students. Thus, while their perceptions included a high regard for intrinsic motivation, they continued to emphasize, in reality, extrinsic motivators. This tension of believing in one ideology and practicing another suggests implications for those contemplating nongradedness and for further research.

Lastly, a challenge that emerged in this study entailed the recognition of the complexity of nongradedness. Previous research addressed the complex issues surrounding past attempts with nongradedness. One study documented that the complex nongraded definition comprised critical components that were a challenge to implement simultaneously (Aagaard, Coe, Moore and Kannapel, 1994). Another study found that teachers' misunderstanding of nongradedness constituted one of the main problems that was encountered during the implementation process (Appalachia Educational Laboratory & Kentucky Education Association, 1991). In McLoughlin's (1969) study of nongradedness, he noted that many changes to nongradedness had been a change in structure only and attempts to change instructional methods had not occurred. The teachers were not able to apply the complex definition of nongradedness. Rather, they simply instituted an organizational change, failing to incorporate the critical components that contribute to nongradedness.

The data collected in the current study suggested that some of the challenges they experienced were due to the complex nature of nongradedness. As the six teachers struggled to apply their definition of nongradedness, these tensions illuminated the notion that nongradedness is not a rudimentary endeavor. For example, some of the teachers opined that in their definition of nongradedness, a hands-on approach to math and science instruction was critical and that the whole language philosophy provided a good foundation for literacy in the nongraded classroom. Another example of the complex issues that surround nongradedness is that the teachers varied in how they viewed the role of retention in their nongraded program. While one teacher felt that to retain a child in her classroom for a third year would result in a repeat of curriculum, another teacher thought that keeping children for an additional year was an option that should be exercised more often. Another teacher noted that the multiage teachers and administrators needed to develop a retention policy that adhered to the goals of their multiage program. The last example of the complexities that teachers in this study perceived related to the principal that had joined the Central staff in the second year of the program. Some of the Central teachers posited that they had failed to enlist the support of the new principal because she did not quite understand the complex issues surrounding nongradedness.

While previous research on nongradedness indicated that various problems could be anticipated, the results of the current study further illuminated the complex issues that might arise when nongradedness is implemented. The findings of this research seem to suggest that a careful examination of the challenges and issues might reveal whether or not the potential teachers that would be practicing nongradedness are indeed making the type of transition that is more

than an organizational change. Thus, the complex nature of nongradedness is an issue providing implications for further research.

In reference to the conclusions that were highlighted earlier in this chapter and the three previous issues, the following possibilities for future research are offered.

1. How does the implementation of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program affect student achievement? How might factors identified in this study, such as teachers having more time with students, higher expectations, and knowledge of students, interact with achievement gains?
2. How can teachers teach in a way that successfully promotes intrinsic motivation and cooperation rather than extrinsic motivation and competition?
3. How can the complexities surrounding an attempt at educational reform such as nongradedness be examined so that the contributing components are understood and adhered to by all participants?
4. How can teachers become effective classroom managers that are able to individualize instruction, create flexible, temporary student groups, and document student progress?
5. Would current trends in education, such as whole language, cooperative learning, peer mediation, conflict resolution, authentic assessment, and thematic teaching, be more effective in a nongraded rather than graded setting?
6. How can policy makers and administrators ensure that reform efforts are able to proceed and enjoy a higher rate of success?
7. How does the implementation of a nongraded, multiage continuous progress program affect student satisfaction? How might the factors identified in this study, such as a supportive environment, students learning to portray various roles, and exposure to variety and choice, affect gains in student satisfaction?
8. Is there a relationship between student satisfaction and student achievement within a nongraded setting?

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Menu

- ☐ Comprehension Questions
- ☐ Birthday Story
- ☐ Newspaper Paper
- ☐ Unifix Measuring
- ☐ Kinds of Weather
- ☐ Draw a flag
- ☐ Tile Card
- ☐ Windy Tape
- ☐ Wear and Use

A la carte

Centers

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

Handwriting

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Safety Book

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Dessert

- ☐ Sidewalk Chalk
- ☐

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